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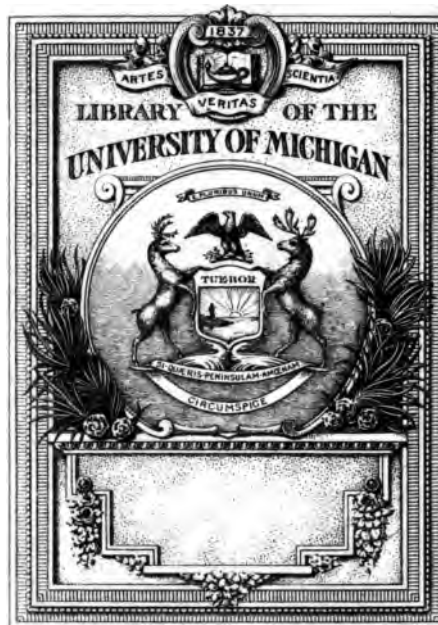
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THE THREE LOVERS

FRANK SWINNERTON

BY FRANK SWINNERTON

THE THREE LOVERS

COQUETTE

SEPTEMBER

SHOPS AND HOUSES

NOCTURNE

THE CHASTE WIFE

ON THE STAIRCASE

THE HAPPY FAMILY

THE CASEMENT

THE YOUNG IDEA

THE MERRY HEART

GEORGE GISSING

A Critical Study

R. L. STEVENSON

A Critical Study

THE THREE LOVERS

Auth^y BY
FRANK SWINNERTON

AUTHOR OF "COQUETTE," "SEPTEMBER," "SHOPS AND HOUSES,"
"NOCTURNE," ETC.

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PART ONE

THE THREE LOVERS

CHAPTER ONE: THE STUDIO

i

IT was a suddenly cold evening towards the end of September. The streets were very dark, because the sky was filled with heavy clouds; and from time to time, carried by an assertive wind, there were little gusts of fine rain. Everybody who walked along the London pavements shivered slightly, for the summer had disappeared in a few hours and had been buried in this abrupt darkness; and the wind seemed to come flying from all corners of the earth with a venom that was entirely unexpected. The street-lamps were sharp brightnesses in the black night, wickedly revealing the naked rain-swept paving-stones. It was an evening to make one think with joy of succulent crumpets and rampant fires and warm slippers and noggins of whisky; but it was not an evening for cats or timid people. The cats were racing about the houses, drunken with primeval savagery; the timid people were shuddering and looking in distress over feebly hoisted shoulders, dreadfully prepared for disaster of any kind, afraid of sounds and shadows and their own forgotten sins. Sensitive folk cast thoughts at the sea, and pitied those sailors whose work kept them stationary upon the decks of reeling vessels already weather-beset. The more energetic breathed deep if they were out-of-doors, or more comfortably stretched towards their fires if they were within. Poor people hud-

dled into old overcoats or sat on their nipped fingers in close unheated rooms. The parsimonious who by settled ritual forswore fires until the first of October watched the calendars and found an odd delight in obedience to rule. The wind shook the window-panes; soot fell down all the chimneys; trees continuously rustled as if they were trying to keep warm by constant friction and movement.

In the main streets the chain of assembled traffic went restlessly on, with crowded omnibuses and tramcars, with hurrying cabs, and belated carts and drays, as though the day would never cease. The footways were thick with those who walked, bent this way and that to meet and baffle the sweeping breezes. The noises mingled together in one absorbing sound, heard at a distance of many miles, a far undersong to the vehement voice of the country. Apart from the main streets, so crowded and busy, London was peculiarly quiet. If a door banged it was like a gun; and such a rumble provoked only a sudden start, and no constriction of the cardiac muscles, for Londoners were no longer accustomed to the sound of guns breaking night silences with their drum-like rollings. Passengers in every direction instinctively hurried, making for shelter from the rainy draughts and the promise of storm. It was a subtly dismal evening, chilled and obscure. It was the real beginning, however premature, of a long hard winter. Those who had joys were sobered: those who had griefs were suddenly overpowered by them, depressed and made miserable by the consciousness of unending sorrow. Nobody could remain unaffected by so startling a change in the atmosphere. All craved light and warmth and society. In a few hours the aspect of life had altered and winter forebodings were upon the land.

Out in South Hampstead the big old houses stood black in the common murk. Few of the windows were lighted. The only illumination came from the street lamps, which seemed crushed by the overmastering clouds, and from occasional passing cabs, whirring swiftly out of the main roads and losing themselves once again within an instant's space. The wide roads were clear, the noises subdued: one would have thought it midnight and the shuttered city at rest. But within these comfortable houses the scene was changed. Fires brightly burned and gas or electric light gave an enviable brightness even to rooms the furniture of which was stale with irremediable ugliness. Warmth and comfort was in every house. It was a whole district of warmth and comfort. And in one house especially there was a gently pervasive heat, a subdued brightness, a curiously wanton elegance, in strong contrast with the outside chill. It was a long two-storeyed house lying back from the broad road. One reached it by means of a wide gravel sweep, and the solid old door supported a heavy knocker of iron. The house stood quite alone, as silent as its fellows; but its furnishing, although sparse in the modern manner, was dazzling. It was like the house of a suddenly transported Pasha, and colours dashed themselves upon the eye with a lustre that commanded surrender. To meet such colours without a trembling of the eyelids would have been impossible to normal men. They were rich to a point of extravagance. They all sang together like the morning stars, clashing and commingling like the notes of barbaric music. They made a very beautiful scene, intoxicating and superb. And cunningly, as though some arch genie had brought the fur-

nishings hither, they merged into voluptuous comfort. One sat in chairs that rose caressingly about one like the waters of a river. The lights were so shaded that nothing harsh or strident offended the eye. The taste of the whole, although extraordinarily courageous, was unquestionable. The owner of this house, whatever one might think of his paintings, was obviously a connoisseur. He knew. He was upon the point of entertaining friends in his studio. His hospitality richly ignored and dominated the weather. He defied the outer world, as though he had been a magician. It was his nature to ignore every discomfort as he ignored his correspondence; and this house, the home of a sybarite, was the symbol of his arrogant disregard.

Monty Rosenberg was a sublimely and ruthlessly selfish man, who gave joy to others by accident, pursuing all the while his own luxurious aims. From the day of his birth until this lamentable evening in September he had never wished to benefit anybody but himself. He lived to and for himself, and this beautiful home had been made for his own delight; and yet the inscrutable ways of life had performed a seeming miracle, and Monty was to-night a mere voiceless child obeying the decrees of circumstance. He was preparing to entertain his guests in a mood of solemn and magistral calm. He thought nothing at all of their pleasure or their envy. He was as much above snobbery as he was below compassion. But he had created an atmosphere of gorgeous appropriateness to the marvels of the human heart, and the gloomy night furnished a contrast as violent as the most emotional person in the world could have desired. He had prepared a stir of colour which must affect all those who were to be present upon this occasion.

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Monty was walking about his studio in a state as nearly approaching self-satisfaction as his sleek pride would permit. He relished the studio's warmth, its beauty. He sufficiently perceived his own beauty, for although he was fat for his thirty-seven years, and although in a short time he would be subsiding into a grossly apparent middle-age, Monty carried his heaviness with an air of distinction. His manner was such that the least sycophantic accorded him the usual tokens of respect. He was well-built; his clothes were well-cut; his rather sensual face retained in its aquiline nose a delicacy and in its soft eyes a suggestion of smouldering fire which saved it from anything like dulness. He was still graceful in all his movements. His long black hair was beautifully worn; the single ring upon his little finger was small and in keeping with his fastidious hands. A slight vanity gave him unfailing carriage and address. Oxford, money, talent, all combined to make him agreeable. He had no friends. There was no essential kindness in his nature. He was an artist and a connoisseur, a viveur and a solitary, a quick and shrewd calculator who would have been a good business man if circumstances had not legitimised his air of general unconcern with petty economies. He was still a stranger, a polished and foreign stranger, to all his acquaintance; and no man knew his secrets. That he had secrets was evident. There was talk, of course, about Monty as there is about every man of personality in the world of chatter. He was too discreet in his relations with all—though never so furtive as to hint at mysterious understandings—to avoid altogether the belief that he managed his "affairs" (which were supposed to be many) with skill and gentlemanly coolness, and his manner towards women was a little assured.

At least one of his prospective guests had seen him angry, when a kind of thick toughness of savagery had flung breeding to the ends of the earth. He was not a gentleman through and through; but he was a tolerable enough imitation of one—an imitation that was not all counterfeit. The tough will which lay behind his usually suave manner was what made his imperiousness weigh in the minds of social inferiors. These inferiors could not avoid reading and fearing danger to themselves behind that steady assumption of their obedience. Others also were aware of a menace, and they gave place rather uncomfortably to Monty. Some of them, bidden to his parties, came with reluctance; and revenged themselves for their fears by sarcasms uttered at a safe distance.

So upon this September evening, fastidiously aware of every detail in the studio, of every detail in the proceedings (so far as these could be planned in advance), Monty stood looking at his finger-nails or smoking an aromatic cigarette or reading carelessly from book or paper, waiting for his guests to arrive. He was ready well in advance of the appointed hour; but he was not restless or impatient, but gave the impression of being imperturbably in harmony with the quiet tickings of his handsome clock. Outside in South Hampstead the whirling wind sank, and the rain which had come earlier in gusts began to fall in a spiteful steady downpour. The clouds hung lower and more threateningly over London. Everything became sodden with shivering wet, and gulleys and drains were full of singing water. The rain hissed; running footsteps were sometimes heard; the lamps were streaming with rillets formed by helter-skelter raindrops.

iv

As the hour of eight o'clock approached, Monty drew from his pocket a hunter watch and snapped open the case, observing the motion of the seconds hand with a kind of absorbed interest. In reality his brain was slowly working and he was hardly aware of the movement under his eyes. He was recalling the preparations which he had made and calculating the numbers of his guests. Twenty people were coming—people of all sorts; but mostly people belonging to that type to which an American writer has given the name of troubadours. That is to say, few among them were what would be called men of action; for men of action, who had nothing to say for themselves or whose view of life was philistine, had no interest for Monty. Men of action were men who could dance and kill and plan utilitarian works, but who could not think of anything that required an original and creative gift. Their interests were at best mechanical; and at the worst they had no vital interests at all apart from the consumption of time. To Monty, whose consumption of time was lordly and individualistic, who could do nothing without a clear aim, such men were outside the pale. He was no sentimentalist. His mind shrank from nothing. Applied to men and women it was almost purely corrosive and therefore destructive; and his self-sufficiency was so great that no affection ever made him yield his judgment to a warmer feeling. He never acted upon impulse, never caught beauty or inspiration flying; but always deliberately and mathematically laid foundations and with skill built up his structure with an eye to the final effect. He never loved anything or anybody enough to lose his head. He could always, at any moment, draw up and dismiss an inconvenience or a line of conduct, so that nothing and no-

body ever had a claim upon him that he could not repudiate. He was a wise man in a world of impulsive fools running after their own tails and dashing emotionally into hysteria.

Eight o'clock chimed by the gentle bell of the clock which stood upon a table in the far corner of the studio. The strokes pinged and hung like scent upon the air. Monty sat unmoved, fingering his watch, slowly passing his thumb backwards and forwards across the golden case. He was lost in a reverie. His eyes were narrowed as though he were scrutinising a memory and paring it down to its essential traits. With such an expression his face lost vitality and became heavy—not ugly or sinister, but unpleasing. The coldness of his nature was revealed, with its adjunct of unplanned but deliberate cruelty. The secret of Monty's self-command and his power to deal with every event was no longer a secret, but a calculable fact. It lay plain to see in that disregard of others which marks the *esprit fort*, the strong man of our weak ideal. He was a secret man, captain of his own nature, and capable through insensibility to their conflicting aims of dominating the actions of others.

Eight o'clock, and silence in this gorgeous house upon the miserable September night. Monty sat in luxurious quiet, waiting for his first guests. The moments dropped quietly away as the softly-ticking clock marked their passage. At last a short peal sounded at the door-bell. Monty rose, his steps noiseless upon the heavy rugs, and moved to greet the early arrivals. He advanced into the wide and tapestried hall.

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And then for half-an-hour came successive rings at the bell, and loud-speaking people arrived in a general

flurry of raindrops and shiverings. Some of them had walked through the rain, others had come in taxicabs, one or two in their own cars. The hall, with additional mats and two or three long jars to hold umbrellas, was quickly sprinkled from the overcoats and furs of the visitors; two rooms adjoining were made into cloak-rooms; and then the studio was invaded. Here all the visitors, talking, laughing, cigarette-smoking, sat upon chairs or divans or cushions, and scattered the ash from their cigarettes in every direction, as motley and restless as the furnishings, and still by great fortune harmonious. There were women in short frocks, with bobbed hair, and women with long gowns and long hair decorated with combs, one or two in evening-dress, one in plain black; and men in all varieties of costume from dinner-jackets to tweeds. Above their heads, towards the studio's glass roof, rain-bespattered, rose tobacco-smoke; from their lips came an endless spume of words, often enough in loud voices which from the hall itself made the guests sound like a distant multitude. The studio was dwarfed by the presence of so many people and so much noise. To Edgar Mayne, who alone of all those invited stood slightly aloof, as one to whom the others were strangers, it seemed that never had he heard people with such loud voices, except at performances given by the Stage Society. He was one of the sober ones—a man of nearly forty, undistinguished in appearance and dressed in an ordinary lounge suit. His association with Monty was that of business only, and he was here experimentally, quite lost in the crowd, and so unsympathetic with it as at times to be almost hostile. So he stood away from the fire, back from the rest, and surveyed them with an unreadable air of interest. He received stares of appraisal from all; no greeting, but also no coolness, had been vouchsafed; and he knew that he could

without fear of a snub have entered any one of the several deafening conversations which were in progress in his neighbourhood. He preferred to look on, for this society was to such a worker as himself something so novel as to be nearly incredible. He was half-dazed by the noise and the colour and the rising smoke. The general relation of the men and women baffled him. The women had not ceased to be women, but their professionalism and slanginess made them exceptional in his eyes. That he liked them, Edgar could not have said; but he was not yet summing-up. They were merely different from the suburban young women whom he met at tennis or in the drawing-room. For one thing, Edgar had never yet been at a mixed party where conversation was regarded as a sufficient form of entertainment. He had never met women who talked as freely as these did.

So his eyes wandered from face to face—from a man with long hair who spoke in a rather strained high voice to a sturdy young woman in a cretonne frock which appeared barely to reach her knees, who lolled back against the leg of a table and held a cigarette so dangling from her lips that its smoke straggled up into her eyes. He could hear nothing but odd words from all the conversations; but the tones, the gestures, and the glances of the talkers were all new and puzzling to such a stranger. His eyes were never at rest. Purple, gold, crimson, scarlet, green, terracotta, black; faces that were long and thin, surmounted by straight fringes of hair, or round and plump and white, with full lips and heavy eyes; a fluttering hand, a startling costume—all caught his gaze and helped to bewilder him. The types were strange, the voices and the assumptions; and Edgar was from Respectability and Commerce, and too old to be merely excited. He was critical, as well. He was especially

critical of the girls, although upon the whole he preferred the girls to the men.

One young man with high spirits and a quick laugh several times drew his attention. He studied him—a tall, fair type, very handsome, and with large white teeth which showed when he laughed. The young man was big and well-made. He carried himself with an ease that suggested athletics, and he had evidently a great deal of self-assurance. He was talking to a short, and rather plump, girl whose black hair, bobbed, and milk-white complexion made her one of the most attractive of them all. That he was amusing her there could be no doubt. Her eyes were raised delightedly, so that it was the young man who sometimes looked away and returned and occasionally flickered a little glance at others in the room. Edgar's consciousness registered a definite impression. He liked the fair, and rather sparkling, young man with the white teeth; but he at once made purely masculine reservations. They might only be jealousies, for we are all alert to see the limitations of others; but they were valid for Edgar. As he was engaged in judgment he discovered for the first time that the young man, through all his sportive talk, was demonstrating a similarly observant interest in himself, and no doubt docketing complementary reservations. A half-smile crept to Edgar's face. The left hand, resting in his trousers pocket, involuntarily clenched. His chin hardened. With his lids lowered he looked straight back at the boy, and the smile vanished.

vi

The studio by now was well-filled; and from Monty's engagement in the general hubbub Edgar supposed that the total number of expected guests had arrived and had

taken their places in the crowd. But he was wrong, for in spite of the fact that he could no longer hear the bell he could see the door opening again to admit further newcomers. His attention was being given to those nearest, and for an instant he did not do more than glance towards the door. Most of those about him were self-absorbed, or intent upon what they were talking about, which amounted to the same thing. The smoke and the chatter, in fact, allowed Edgar no free activity of the mind. He was as one drowning. It was only a sense that his young friend of the flashing teeth had ceased talking that gave Edgar an opportunity for this instant's new interest. He looked up and towards the door. There stood within the studio an old man—a tall old man with a long white moustache and a rather bald head, erect but markedly obsequious to Monty, dressed in such a way that all must recognise him as a painter. A slight pucker showed in Edgar's forehead. The face was familiar, the bearing . . . He knew the man. He was conscious of displeasure at seeing him. But he could not immediately remember what had given rise to this distaste. Then, he looked beyond the old man, and his attentiveness quickened. In the doorway stood a young girl. She was very slight, very fair, and her dress was both beautiful and striking. Her hair was worn so that a rolled curl was above each ear, and it was brushed high from her neck. Clear blue eyes, a delicate nose, an impetuous mouth, a peculiar stillness in her attitude; and Edgar could no longer record detail in his general admiration. He was filled with interest. Not even the green dress which she wore and which startled the eye could rob Edgar of the sudden impression that she was somebody alone—alone in the world, alone in herself, alone here this evening. She was the first person who had struck him in all this party as belonging to life as he

imagined it to be. There was a fresh vitality about the girl that he found in none of the others. In none?

Edgar looked from the girl to Monty, who had taken her hand and was smiling. Monty, with his rather heavy, rather oriental face and figure, smooth and impossible to be hurt, a man of determination and of personality. Edgar knew very quickly what Monty's nature was. He was not unpractised in the art of understanding his fellows. The experience by which this skill had been gained had been a part of the training which had led to his business success. The contrast, then, to Edgar, between Monty and the girl who had come as his guest was as unmistakable as was the difference in their complexions. There was no likeness here. Edgar would have made no further comment; but some instinct made him look from Monty's possessive figure to another, which stood nearer. It was that of the young man whom he had noticed before. The teeth were to be seen at this moment, for the young man was standing, as fair and as full of vitality as the girl herself, with his lips parted and his eyes intent. There was no mistaking the significance of his attitude and his tense regard. Edgar looked again from the girl to Monty, as they stood together by the door; and he saw the sparkle of the girl's eyes and the quick flight of her smile. Again he looked from Monty to the young man, and so back to the girl. And as he returned to his observation of the young man Edgar saw him take a quick breath, and saw his lips meet.

It was in this single instant that the young man, urged no doubt by an impulse as incalculable as Edgar's, drew his eyes from the girl. He turned sharply and looked at Edgar. Their glances crossed. Both smiled.

CHAPTER TWO: NEW FRIENDS

i

HARRY GREENLEES, the young man with the flashing teeth, had been given his Rugby blue ten or eleven years before, and had helped Oxford to beat Cambridge in a memorable year. Since leaving the University he had played for two seasons with the Harlequins; but his footballing days were over now as he could no longer endure the strain of ninety-minutes' incessant conflict. During the rather aimless experiments which followed in the art of earning a living without exertion, Harry had revived an undergraduate habit of writing sporting descriptive articles, and to fellow-journalists his competence for this work was known. It was not, however, celebrated among his friends or the general public, and as he had fallen in quite by accident with a semi-literary and artistic set, the members of which took him for granted as a cheerful companion with enough money to live on, Harry enjoyed a most agreeable sort of life. His work was slangy and vigorous, and if it did not produce an income upon which a man of his type could exist, it made sufficient the small private means which were already at Harry's command. He was able to support himself in comfort and to go about the world very much at his ease.

Abroad, Harry walked, with a knapsack on his shoulders, and saw the countries of Europe from the road. It was for papers chiefly concerned with out-of-door life and sport that he worked, and accordingly he found material ready for his eye and his fountain-pen wherever

he turned for diversion. His was a life of varied pleasure, and for as long as he remained fit he would find it inexhaustible in possibilities. He was a lively companion and a good sort. He was full of zest, making friends lightly and as lightly letting them go. Everybody felt his honesty and his energy, and he had neither the mannerisms of the unduly famous nor the menacing air of those who are intellectually better than their company. He was happy, impulsive, handsome, agreeable, and charming. It needed an Edgar Mayne to detect his faults, and Harry was too unsuspecting and satisfied to suppose that others were more subtle than himself.

He had been talking to Rhoda Flower, the dark girl with the milk-white face, when he first observed Edgar. And Edgar had been so little remarkable in appearance that this was the first fact about him which Harry had noticed. Harry, however, had found himself looking back at Edgar, unable to account for the interest he felt in the unknown. Rhoda, whom he had asked, knew no more about the man than he did, and had been indifferent; but Harry was definitely curious. If Edgar had been nearer he would have found himself directly addressed; but as it was the exchanged glance already mentioned was the only communication to pass between the two men. The glance had originated in a most singular impression which formed in Harry's mind.

When Monty had moved forward to great old Dalrymple, who was some sort of artist, Harry had felt his usual dislike of the man, based upon the feeling that Dalrymple carried with him an air of stale drink and unsuccess. But he had looked past the old man to the unknown girl who seemed to be his companion; and instantly there shot through him that strong sexual interest which Harry was in the habit of calling "love." He was a strong young man, very sufficiently sensual, and his

notions of love were made accordingly. It was a quick impulse, and his first thought after receiving it and deciding that he must know the stranger was the realisation that what he had desired Monty also would desire. And then, ignoring all the others present, he had sharply sensed danger. The glance at Edgar had been quite three-quarters of a challenge. The flashing teeth had been bared, and the blue eyes had been hard. But there was something about Edgar which disarmed him. Hence the smile.

This was not the first time Harry had been in love. He was attractive, and he was quickly attracted. He had self-assurance, and he knew how to give pleasure. To Rhoda Flower he was certainly the most attractive person in the world. It was to her that he continued quietly to talk while the stranger was being brought forward to the group round the fireplace. He was teasing Rhoda, and gave no further sign of interest in the other girl; but he knew when she was near. He turned his head and looked at her. He looked from near at hand at the soft, beautifully moulded cheeks and the impetuous mouth and the clear blue eyes; and a very faint additional colour came into his face. Not knowing that Edgar was watching him, he was perfectly aware of the girl's grace and beauty. The curve of her neck and breast and shoulder seemed always to have been known and entrancing to him. With Harry it was love at first sight.

" . . . Greenlees—Miss Quin," said Monty, leading the stranger from one to the other of his older friends, and making her acquainted with them all.

The smoke-filled atmosphere seemed to come down like a cloud against which she stood fresh and lovely. All the vehemences of colour about him were softened. For that instant Harry saw nothing but the stranger,

felt nothing but her hand. He found Miss Quin adorable. She was a reality, a sweet and wayward reality, like a flash of scarlet; and his one desire was to feel her soft hair against his cheek, her cool shoulder, her surrendered lips. The imagination of these contacts was intense. Into Harry's expression of light spirits crept something ever so slightly heavier. He was serious. To him the senses were a cause of seriousness, a cause of the complete oblivion of all that was comic or whimsical.

From behind him came the voice of the young artist, Amy Roberts.

"Hullo, Patricia," she said in greeting.

Patricia! Patricia Quin. So that was the stranger's name. Harry's faint flush subsided. He cooled. The vision had passed. The quick physical imagining was for the present gone, no longer an eager craving. He must talk to her, see her, be with her; but in a few minutes, quite easily and simply. What lay in the future was something which stretched much farther than his immediate vision. To Harry it beckoned as irresistible adventure.

ii

The party swayed and engulfed Patricia. She was among all the others, and talking or listening, extraordinarily delighted with all this sound and colour. To her, whose first party of the kind it was, such a brimming claim to the senses had no shortcomings. It was all new and glorious and intoxicating. She felt herself a queen. Wherever she looked she found the strong colour and sensation for which she had pined. It was the first party, and a landmark. Compared with her days and the unattractive dinginess of her own rooms, Monty's home was all that was rich and desirable. At two-and-

twenty, when one is starving for colour, a glut of it is like a feast. She was so happy, like a child at its first theatre, that she sat there spell-bound. It could not have occurred to her to think these people sophisticated; they were all so kind, she thought to herself, so kind and generous and interesting. Her heart went out to them all. It was as though she cast her own warm affectionateness upon the party. Her radiance increased with each instant. The corners of her mouth went up; her sweet, child-like laugh melted into the general laughter. All this light and colour and sound was superb. It was vivacity and richness, music and poetry, an unequalled stimulant to gaiety and the senses. It was life as she had dreamt of it. There was a spice of daring in such contact with the unknown and the exciting, and daring was her ideal. It was lovely. . . . She was in a beautiful dream of delight.

Even Patricia at last began to look, beaming in her happiness, from one face to the other. They were all faces that interested her. They all had a cast—not of dignity or wisdom, but of something which she thought of as enlightenment. There was a quality about them to which she was unaccustomed, and she exalted it. She was prepared to find all knowledge and emotion in the faces, and she found it. The tones of the voices charmed her; the little jokes which she did not understand, and the fragments of criticism which belonged to another world of interests and consciousness, were all a part of the magic and delight of the evening. She set herself to look round the studio, sitting close to Amy Roberts, as a child might have done, while Amy, to whom all this sort of thing was becoming almost as commonplace as she pretended to Patricia that it already was, preserved an air of most distinguished semi-boredom. Amy, herself an artist, told her the names of those pres-

ent, and sometimes, if she knew it, something about the people. Patricia from time to time glanced aside at Amy's fair bobbed hair and her white face and light lashes and eyebrows and dissatisfied mouth; and thought how nice Amy was, and how clever, and how she wished Amy had a sense of humour of the same kind as her own.

"That's Rhoda Flower—that dark girl. She's a dress-designer. Not much good, as you can see from her dress. And those two over on the right, who're so fond of each other and think each other perfect . . ."

"I know. They're engaged," guessed Patricia, laughing.

"More than that. They're *married*. And happy. The only married people I know who *are* happy. And how it is that Olivia has brought herself to leave the babies this evening I can't understand. They must have got a nurse. So I suppose Peter's been making some money, for a change. Olivia and Peter Stephens, they are. They've been married three years, and they've got two babies. They're still devoted to each other."

"Odd!" joked Patricia, with archly raised brows. She had no notion of the truth of her comment in the present company, or of the underlying cynicism which an unfriendly hearer might read into it. Amy looked sideways at her friend. She was puzzled, as the sophisticated always are puzzled by a remark made with nonsensical humour and without consciousness of its implications.

"It is," she agreed drily. "Then there's somebody who *isn't* devoted to her husband—Blanche Tallentyre. And with good reason. That white woman with the salmon lips."

"Is she unhappy?" Patricia's face clouded. She imagined a tragedy, and she still passionately desired happy endings to all stories. She scanned Mrs. Tallentyre's face, and saw the hard lines at the lips, and the

thin cheeks, and how tight her skin was across the cheek bones; and her heart felt soft towards one to whom love had been cruel. Now that she knew this of Blanche Tallentyre she could notice the hunger in Blanche's face, and the thinness of her bare arms, and the cup at the base of her throat. She could imagine sleepless, tearless sorrow. So there was one at least here who, in spite of all the thrill of it, was unhappy.

"Not *too* unhappy," said Amy. "Hush. I'll tell you later. Not now."

They paused, Patricia looking childishly wise in an effort to disguise her faint distaste for this hint at an only dimly-realised form of ugliness; and both stared valiantly round at the others, so mysterious to Patricia, and so fascinating in their mysteriousness.

"Jack Penton's here," proceeded Amy. "Somewhere. Of course, not when he's . . . Oh, there you are, Jack. You know Patricia, don't you? Who's that man at the back? Behind Charlotte Hastings. That quiet man." Patricia looked quickly at Jack Penton, whom she had met before. He was a dark, clean-shaven, commonplace-looking young man with a rasping voice; but he was a good dancer, and she thought him, if not clever, at least intelligent and worthy of some other girl's love. There was camaraderie, but no love, in Amy's manner to the boy; and something very similar, upon the surface, in his manner to Amy; but to Patricia it was agreeable to see their faces near together. But then Patricia was a sentimentalist, and saw and imagined all sorts of things that never existed.

Jack wrinkled his brow in the effort to recall a name half-forgotten.

"Er—I *think* his name's Rayne, or Mayne," he huskily reported. "That's it: Edgar Mayne. He's something in the city. Rather an *old* bird, don't you think? He's

a friend of Monty's. Somebody told me he was clever, but you never know with that sort of chap."

"He looks very nice," whispered Patricia. "But rather stern. I don't think he likes this kind of thing. He looks disapproving. Oh, I wish he liked it."

Again came that incredulous stare from Amy which convicted Patricia of a naïveté. Patricia stiffened a little, and became more guarded. Some vanity in her cried out against criticism. It was the one thing she could not bear.

"Just there, on the right, is Felix Brow," proceeded Amy.

"Not . . ." Patricia began in amazement.

Suddenly, as they sat thus absorbed, there came an interruption.

"Can't I help?" breathed an eager voice. "I can tell you all sorts of things you don't know—about everybody. Who they married, and why they separated, and who they're living with. I'm really an expert guide."

They all looked up, and saw Harry Greenlees, whose face was so lowered to Patricia's that it was almost level with her own. It was so close, too, that she could see the warm colour under his skin, and the crisp hairs of his moustache, and the curl of his lips as they parted in a smile of entreaty. Seen near at hand, Harry's face had all the additional attractiveness which health gives to good features. His vigour was manifest. There was a pleading in his eyes that was almost irresistible. It was the pleading of an ideally masterful lover who would not understand a refusal and so would not accept it. Patricia looked, and held back her own head until the curve of her cheek was lengthened and made even more beautiful than before. She was smiling, and when she smiled one beheld such a picture of happiness that one became

quite naturally intrigued and marvelling. To Harry the picture was an intoxication.

"You may tell me everything," said Patricia, with assurance equal to his own. "But first of all tell me who *you* are."

He took a seat upon the floor by her side, clasping his knees, and fixing his attention upon the two plump little hands which were clasped in Patricia's lap.

"I am the most marvellous and unfortunate of men," he said. "Unfortunate, at least, until this very minute. My name is Harry Greenlees. . . ."

iii

To Patricia it was all as delicious as a fairy tale. She was not unused to admiration, for her beauty was of the kind to draw men; but the admiration of the men she had known had been too easily won to possess any lasting value. She had become regal and fastidious, accepting homage even while she despised those by whom it was offered. And who were these men, after all? They were men she had met at local dances, or in the office in which she had not very competently or devotedly worked. A few she had met at the homes of acquaintances, a few at the seaside hotels at which she and her uncle had stayed from summer holiday to summer holiday. They had been clerks or young school-masters or inferior stragglers in one or other of the professions. All, apart from the admiration they offered and the fact that they were more or less organically sound males, had failed to interest a lively intelligence and an impatient spirit. But now that her uncle, like her father and mother, was dead; and now that, having lost her situation and determined upon a Career for Herself, Patricia was in new lodgings and facing life upon a new footing,

the case was altered. Old Dalrymple, whom she had met several times, and who had pleased her with his rather stale compliments and the still-unpricked bubble of his exaggerated tales of acquaintance with the great, had brought her to Monty's. He had been proud to do it. Partly he had an old man's rather morbid sentimental feeling towards her, which played with the pretence that it was paternal; and partly he had the knowledge that Patricia was a creditable companion. So he had brought her here on this occasion, and Patricia, revelling in the newness of her delight, had forgotten him. She was already in a hitherto-untasted heaven. And this ardent young man at her feet, who shone with admiration so confident and encroaching as almost to excite her, was a new type to Patricia. She had always been so much quicker-witted than her followers that she had discouraged them in turn. She was still engaged in battling with Harry's wit, and thinking it exceedingly nimble and daring and charming. She was more and more charmed each minute, partly with Harry, partly with herself for so charming him.

He told her about all the different men and women who were before her, what they did in order to live, and why they were present; and as she skipped quickly with her eyes and brain from one to the other he made up a great deal of nonsense about their private lives which diverted Patricia extraordinarily, while Amy listened with disapproval to the whole catalogue.

"Stuff!" she at last interrupted. "There's not a word of truth in it, Patricia."

"I know!" bubbled Patricia. "Don't you see, that's what's so nice!" Her whole face was alight as she spoke. Amy's objection seemed to Patricia to show her so very pedestrian in standard and judgment.

"Patricia understands me," said Harry, unchecked in

his use of her Christian name. "She's the first person to understand me. Do you know, I've been looking all over the world for you—for thirty weary years." He beamed whimsically, handsomer in Patricia's eyes each instant.

"I wonder how many times you've said that," snapped Amy, who was impervious.

"A million times, and never meant it until now." Harry's smile showed his big white teeth, and long lashes shaded his eyes; and his big frame was so firm and manifest that Patricia, in laughing as she did with an exultancy that almost held tears, was full also of happiness in the enjoyment of his manly graces.

"I understand everything," she announced, confidently; and mystically believed it.

"Yes, but he doesn't think so," warned Amy, in grave alarm. "Or he wouldn't be telling lies at such a rate. It isn't *true* that Dolly Fletcher's the daughter of a Russian prince and a charwoman."

"Oh, but wouldn't it be nice if she was!" cried Patricia.

"Exactly," agreed Harry, and proceeded to embroider his legend. "You see the short nose of the Russian of high caste, and hear the accent of the London back street. Notice the powder, the scent, the gold chain; the fur edging to her frock. You can imagine snow on her shoes and a pail in her hand. You can imagine waves of dirty water slopping just under the edge of the bed, and silk underclothing, and cosmetics, and a bath on the first Sunday of the Month—as a rarefied sensual indulgence."

"She does look dirty," admitted Amy, scrutinizing Dolly. "It's her skin. But she's a very decent sort."

This was said defiantly, while Patricia wondered. How strange! It was the first flaw that she had found in her handsome new friend, and it was unwelcome. She

wished he had not spoken in that way. It troubled her.

"Tell us what you know about Mr. Mayne," said Patricia, to change this topic and to conceal her distress. It continued for a moment or two, nevertheless, as an undercurrent to her thoughts, and was still unpleasant. Personal uncleanliness was abhorrent to her; but the joking suggestion of it was equally abhorrent. It was an ugliness.

"Mayne? Who's he? Oh, is *that* Mayne? Really!" Harry seemed for a moment to be lost in thought. "How astonishing. Edgar Mayne. I didn't know who it was. Well, Mayne's a peculiar fellow, as I don't mind telling you."

"Is he married?" demanded Amy impatiently. "If you don't know anything about him, say so. Don't make it up. If you play any tricks on us about the man I shall go across and ask him myself."

"No, this is true," said Harry, reflectively. As he spoke he looked again at Edgar, who was talking to Rhoda Flower and listening calmly to her chatter. "He's a man who started as a bootblack or something. . . ."

"Lie number one," commented Amy. "Take care!"

"Well, an office boy. And he got to be a ledger clerk. And he became an accountant. And then manager. And then partner. No, Amy, he's not married, as far as I know. And instead of marrying he's stuck to work and he's just bought a newspaper of some sort. So I suppose he's presently going into Parliament, and intends to be in the Cabinet in five years. He'll attack the Government in his paper until he's offered a job; and then they'll give him an Under-Secretaryship. Then he'll push out the old chap above him, and become a Minister. And there you are."

"Very nice. He's rich, then?" Amy was as sharp and persistent as the claws of a playing kitten.

"I s'pose so. I don't know. He's the industrious apprentice."

Unperceived by his hearers, Harry was sneering a little, as one always does at industriousness, with the suggestion that it is a common vice, whereas it is a chimera.

"What's the paper he's bought?" asked Jack Penton. "If it's a daily he'll burn his fingers. I thought he was in the City."

"I don't know what the paper is." Harry's motion towards Jack, however graceful and even consciously charming, showed that he was busy with his more honest thoughts. They became vocal, and his voice, hitherto so ingratiatingly warm, had lost all quality. It was merely cautious and speculative. "I wonder if he'd give me the job of Sports Editor on it," Harry said.

"Take it," jeered Amy. "Take it. That's the sort of thing you do, isn't it?"

Harry smiled again, altogether recovered, and once again the teasing comrade he had been. It was a most welcome return.

"I will," he assured them. "You may regard it as taken. I'll just tell Mayne about it before he goes."

Patricia listened still, the colour deeper in her cheeks as the result of so much excitement and new knowledge. She was quite fascinated by Harry, as she was fascinated by this whole unfamiliar scene. She could hardly keep still, so delighted was she to be in this realm of men and women who "did" things, whose names and qualities and actions were known and public. Such gossip as she had heard was quite new to her. Such assurance as Harry had shown in sketching the possible future of Mr. Mayne argued an inside knowledge of the world of politics and affairs and finance and wide-reaching action involving the fortunes of other people which no man whom she had hitherto known had possessed or pretended to pos-

sess. A gentle glance of encouragement, almost shy, but wholly attractive, passed between Patricia and Harry. Upon his side it was prolonged. He gave a little laugh.

"Oh, it's a great life!" he ejaculated, as though he had known her thoughts.

How Patricia agreed with him!

"It's a *great* life!" she emphatically repeated, kindled to enthusiasm at having her vaguer thoughts crystallised. And she felt how she and Harry appreciated it in common as a great life, and was again pleased and excited, so that she wanted to clap her hands with joy. The little group of four, of which Patricia and Harry were the centre, was observed by all; and if Patricia was in any degree aware of this the knowledge can only have added to her conviction of the general splendid entertainingness of life. She was quite carried out of herself and into the spirit of the hour.

iv

By this time the first half of the evening was coming to an end. Monty, who had talked to all his guests, had observed that it was ten o'clock; and it was now that a screen at one end of the studio was removed, allowing the buffet for the first time to reveal its attractions. The visitors spread—all except our party of four;—and the most remarkable collection of drinks and foodstuffs was being relished by all. For some moments Patricia and her friends knew nothing of what was going forward; but at last Harry and Jack rose abruptly from their places to secure refreshment for their charmers. No sooner had they joined the group at the buffet than Monty and Edgar approached the two girls, the former bearing a tray upon which were glasses large and small, and the latter a couple of piled plates. It was Monty's habit to make his guests serve themselves, and he had only re-

laxed his rule because he was interested in Patricia and her youthful delight. Upon his heels as he thus approached hung Dalrymple, who saw an opportunity of reclaiming his charge. Patricia had forgotten Dalrymple—characteristically,—although but for him she would never have known the joys of the evening at all.

She was charmed at being thus waited upon, and accepted champagne cup and some of Edgar's more nourishing products with the most urbane pleasure. To Edgar, who came second in the procession, she was especially friendly, for she had been absorbed by Harry's tale of his history. She had time only to thank him and to catch his grave smile, and then Dalrymple, rather officiously, brought himself to her notice.

"Is Patricia having a good time?" the old man asked, with his smirking air of hints and mystery. "That's right. That's right. Is there room here for an old man?"

Amy looked at him with aversion as he squeezed into their seat beside Patricia, and her expression was suspicious and scornful. But Patricia had no criticism. It was nothing to her that his eyes were protruding and gooseberry-like, and the fringe of his moustache above the mouth browned with the stains of food and much drink. She was in a mood to welcome all who contributed to this party. She felt in a curious psychic way that it was peculiarly *her* party; and the atmosphere of the place would have led her, in any case, to frank friendliness with all comers. She was transported, and hardly conscious of her own actions. The barbaric colours seemed to have mingled into a glorious harmony, and she was as much intoxicated by these colours and the sounds and associations of the evening as she could have been made by deep potations. The glass in her hand was only half-empty; but she was drunk with happiness, her

cheeks flushed, her eyes brimming with laughter, her lips parted in eager sportiveness. Danger she could not foresee. She lived in the moment, and knew that for her it was good. She was unaware of Dalrymple's singular glance, with its old man's ugliness and preoccupation. She could not read the expression upon Monty's face when he looked at her over the glass-laden tray. She knew nothing of Amy's grave distrust and even suspicion. She only felt that she had never been so happy.

Upon an impulse she thrust her glass into Dalrymple's hand, and rose and went straight to Edgar. It was extraordinary that she should feel no embarrassment; but Patricia did not reflect. She was acting upon impulse, and she exalted impulse, as modern young women are in the habit of doing. Moreover, all who knew Edgar trusted him.

"I wanted to ask you . . ." began Patricia, and then faltered. Edgar's face was blurred to her vision by the tears that suddenly filled her eyes. She blinked them away, and took new courage from his expression. This man, so different from the others there, was one of those, she felt, who could always be reached by the truth. He was so controlled, so grave, that he might have terrified her in other circumstances; but in this mood of exaltation Patricia was carried beyond fear. "I wanted to ask you . . ." she stammered again. "They say . . . Mr. Greenlees says you've just bought a newspaper. . . . And will you *please* make him Sports Editor! I don't think he means really to ask you; but he said he would; and I think he wants to be. . . . If only you could, it would be so awfully nice. . . . He's really . . ."

And then Patricia faltered. She was at the end of her knowledge. Her cheeks flushed. For the first time she was conscious of grave discomfort. She would have

cancelled all she had said if it had been possible; but it was too late, and her trembling smile of anxiety was the most beautiful thing Edgar had seen for many days. Nevertheless, he shook his head.

"Such an advocate would secure a man *any* position," he said. "But only if it were available. It is quite true that I've bought a paper; but *what* a paper! Miss Quin—I hardly like to tell you what paper it is. I have only bought it because the Editor is a man I love and admire, and because the paper would otherwise die. It is called 'The Antiquarian's Gazette.' You see, we could only have some very antique sports in such a paper."

"Couldn't you . . . couldn't you . . . bring it up-to-date?" begged Patricia.

Edgar shook his head with so concerned an expression that she could hardly detect his lurking smile.

"I'm afraid . . ." he said.

"No." Patricia was rueful. "No, I see it wouldn't do. I'm sorry, though." Her thoughts ran on apace. "Did you mean," she asked suddenly, "that the editor would have . . . he wouldn't have had anything to live on?"

"Well, he's a very proud old gentleman," admitted Edgar.

"And then you've bought it to . . ."

"More or less," he agreed. "It's a very special case, of course."

"Well, I think you're splendid," Patricia cried. "But then, everything . . ." She paused, almost overcome. "To-night, everything's splendid."

And with that she began quite suddenly to cry, large tears rolling down her cheeks, while Edgar took one of her half-raised hands and held it in his own until she should have regained self-control. It came in a moment, and her friendly smile, so almost roguish, pierced the

tears and obliterated them. Edgar smiled also, in relief and friendship.

"All right?" he questioned, very quietly.

Patricia's other hand was for the lightest instant upon his, and she was free. She nodded reassuringly, and with her handkerchief caused two tears which stood upon her cheeks to vanish. She was like a little girl; but she had made another friend, for nobody could have withstood behaviour as free from artifice and so full of naïve emotion. The episode was finished; but its consequences could never be finished, for a human relation had been established, and these things are undying.

v

With the arrival and circulation of the drinks, Monty's party took a new turn. The noise at first increased, into such a sustained and stentorian buzzing that the sounds would have stunned a newcomer unprepared for such celebrations; but presently the noise so died that the steady downpour of rain could be heard upon the studio's glass roof. The cup was a strong one, mixed by a cunning hand; liqueurs followed; tinklings and small clashes were audible. The party grew quieter. A heaviness began to show in its members. The pallor of some of the guests increased, and with the now great heat of the poorly-ventilated room there came closeness and some discomfort. Only Dalrymple and Frederick Tallentyre (the husband of Blanche—a swarthy man with a mass of dark hair) remained at the buffet; and Dalrymple began to laugh quietly, showing his old yellow teeth.

Patricia looked once at her escort, and if she also had not had the first Benedictine of her life she would have been shocked. As it was she sat still beside Amy, her lips a little swollen and her eyes glowing; almost noisy,

but no longer happy as she had been. Any outbreak of noise and dancing would have carried her with it; but these people, with their increasingly white puffy faces and the seriousness which began to overtake most of those present, were no longer adorable. They fell into a monotony of familiar dummies. Even Harry, eager though he was, she saw with less intensity of vision. He was still delightful and gay; but she was surfeited with emotion. Not at all intoxicated, but over-tired, she was now ready for the end of the evening. She even observed the first departure with some gladness. Departures began and continued.

"I say . . . I'm sorry . . ." Harry was murmuring in Patricia's ear. His hand was upon her wrist. "I say . . . we must meet again, you know."

"Of *course*," she agreed, her face clear and open and full of the sweet candour she was feeling.

"How . . . when can I see you?" He was hot and urgent. "I'm awfully sorry, but I promised to see young Rhoda home. But . . . I . . . er . . . When, I mean . . . when can I see you. I must . . . It's got to be soon, you know." Oh, they were of one mind upon that!

Dalrymple was now alone at the buffet, a benign smile upon his aged face, and his attitude that of one by the world forgotten.

"Any time. Let me know," said Patricia, very gravely, and without coquetry.

"But how can I find you?"

"Amy . . . Any way, it's . . ."

She was giving him her address when Rhoda appeared against the doorway, all muffled in furs, with her expression one of impatience ill-concealed. Harry shook Patricia's wrist, and made off to the door. He turned as he reached it, and kissed his hand. Patricia, with

her head back and her eyes suddenly sombre, waved in return. He was gone. She turned to Amy, who was frowning at Jack Penton. Amy sharply whispered:

"How are you going to get home?"

As if in answer, Dalrymple approached rather lurchingly from the buffet. He smiled ingratiatingly upon the reduced company.

"Where's . . . where's my lit . . . little . . . companion?" he said, coming towards them. It was clear that although he could control his movements he was no longer quite sober.

"No," said Amy, in Patricia's ear.

"I wonder if I might give you a lift in my car, Miss Quin."

The voice was that of Edgar. It was so quiet as to be almost an undertone.

"Oh, *do*." Amy was the one to answer, for Patricia was dazed.

"Get your coat, then. Will you take her?" Edgar supplemented his instruction with the request to Amy; and the two girls moved quickly away. They saw no more of Dalrymple. By the time they were dressed Edgar was waiting in the hall; and they stood in the doorway together while he started the engine of his car. Two great lights illumined the gravel sweep in front of Monty's house. Then Patricia was in a warm, soft-lighted vehicle, and they were in motion. She pressed back in her place, her head throbbing and her mouth still nervously smiling. It was as though she were flying from all unpleasantness, very tired and happy, with one she trusted and would have trusted with her life.

"And now . . ." said Edgar. "Where do we go?"

Patricia was looking back at the doorway. In it she could no longer see Amy and Jack Penton. There remained, silhouetted against the light of the hall, only

the figure of Monty; and Monty, so still that he might have been without pulses, stood watching the departure of Patricia and her escort. For her thereafter there was nothing but the soft purring of the engine and the sense of security and safe harbourage against all the elements.

vi

In the studio, Monty stood alone. His last guest had gone. He was in the midst of that stale atmosphere and the wreck of a past entertainment. Smoke hung about in the air, the faint pungent smells of the drinks and of drying dampness combined with it. All was hot and vitiated. Monty stood with perspiration faintly upon his cheeks and under his heavy eyes. He had mixed himself a glass of whisky and soda, and rested it now upon the mantelpiece. The soft front of his dress shirt was crumpled, and his hair was less thickly smooth than it had been; but he was otherwise immaculate, from his beautifully-cut dinner jacket to his patent-leather shoes. He looked round the studio, and listened to the pattering of rain above his head.

Slowly Monty sank into one of his soft armchairs, and set his glass upon the floor. Around him was an indescribable mess of cigarette ash. The ghost of the party was risen. It was everywhere about him, in the now-silent chatter and the remembered scents and interests of the evening. Monty's thoughts were not mournful or stagnant, as those of one more sensitive might have been. He was entirely collected, and satisfied with his party. There had been no hitch at all; and even Dalrymple had at last been persuaded to go by the arrival of a taxi and the loan of his fare. Monty was alone, well content.

All the same, Dalrymple must never again come to one of his parties. Monty had no use for a man such as he

had shown himself to be. This was for Monty the end of Dalrymple. Far otherwise was the case with Dalrymple's companion. Far otherwise . . . The exclusion of Dalrymple must not affect the little Quin girl. She could be reached through Amy Roberts . . . possibly through Harry Greenlees. . . .

Monty almost smiled as he had this last thought. Then he became serious again. He had other matters to think of. There were many other things. . . .

Half-an-hour later he still sat in the studio, and at last, as his manservant came into the doorway to ask if there were any further instructions, he roused himself from his reverie.

"No. Goodnight, Jacobs," said Monty.

It was quite remarkable how long that little girl's face had remained in his memory, he thought. Fresh . . . She was fresh. Attractive little thing . . . Greenlees seemed to like her. . . ."

Monty laughed quietly to himself.

CHAPTER THREE: PATRICIA

i

PATRICIA was indoors. She lived in two rooms in an old house near the King's Road, and her rooms were at the top of the house. As the door snapped behind her she saw her little bedroom lamp as the only illumination of a narrow passage leading to the stairs; and instinctively she paused, her shadow thrown solid and leaping against the door, while the muffled sound of Edgar's car died away in the distance. The house was dark and silent, and Patricia's heart sank. A sigh of regret escaped her. It was hard to come so abruptly from the glowing scene she had left, with her brain in a ferment of all its new memories and wonderings, to this dingy home in which all was so tasteless. She slowly mounted the stairs, smoke from the lamp's flame smirching the glass chimney and rising acrid to her nostrils. Her bedroom was cold; and a damp shivering breath came from the open window, across which the curtains were yet undrawn. Outside the window everything was black. No lights came even from the houses that backed on to the one in which she lived. She could hear the rustling of the rain. A shudder shook Patricia. Deeply chilled, she moved away from the window.

Even when she was in bed, and slow warmth had returned to her body, she was conscious of unhappiness. It was not that she was normally discontented: she suffered now only from a sense of the acute contrast between this sullen room with the steady rain without and the warmth and peacock brilliance of the studio she had

left. And the journey had been so rapid, and for the most part so silent, that she was plunged sharply back from her dreaming joy to sombre consciousness of everyday reality. Had there been a gay party homeward, had friendly voices shouted jocular farewells from the pavement, the happiness might have continued; but she was shaken at this sharp transition. For the first time Patricia girded at her loneliness, which until now—as independence—had made her feel so proud. To the sense of loneliness was added a memory of her poverty. To be alone and poor, young and eager, was to struggle with gloom itself. She did not cry; but a sob rose in her throat. It was such unmistakable anti-climax to be made to face the fact that she did not rightfully belong to this sparkling world of noise and light and colour in which she had spent the wonderful evening.

“Oh, dear!” cried Patricia to herself, suddenly desperate and at war with her lot, as other debutantes have been. “It’s too bad. It’s too *bad!*”

And then, fortunately, some little recollection from the multitude of recollections which would presently disengage themselves, made her smile. A soft little sound, such as a baby might have made, came from her throat, the lips being once again closed. Her hands were bunched at her breast. It was the reaction caused by the bed’s cosiness and her sweet exhaustion. An instant later she was fast asleep, and in her sleep she smiled as she dreamed of a party of beautiful gaiety, in which she was supreme and unchallenged, . . . the admired and the adored of all . . . Patricia!

ii

In the morning she awoke to ambitious determination. At first waking she knew it was late, and sighed, very

drowsy and comfortable. Happy thoughts began to float into her consciousness, and she smiled again to herself like a little girl. But when Lucy, the maid of the house, tramped up to her door and knocked there with knuckles of iron, Patricia no longer lay in reverie. She instantly arose, took her primitive bath, and was in her sitting-room long before the breakfast arrived.

There were no letters. There were never any letters for Patricia. Letters never come, she believed, to the truly deserving. She had a hunger for letters. She longed intensely to be like those young men in demodé books who opened uncountable bills and billets doux at the breakfast-table and stuck all their cards of invitation round the edges of the mirror upon the mantelpiece. The mirror was there; but no cards adorned it. The mirror had a gilded frame, and was no longer very fresh. It was flanked by vases intended to represent perfectly incredible marble. In the fireplace was a gas-fire, alight. The floor was covered with green and red oilcloth, and a woolly rug of yellow and magenta lay before the hearth. There was a sofa against the opposite wall, and at the window stood a sturdy table bearing a typewriter. In the middle of the room was another table upon which the first signs of breakfast were laid. Here, too, was Patricia's own little bowl of flowers. That bowl, the flowers, and the typewriter, were here her sole possessions. The rest belonged to the landlady who lived somewhere far below stairs, and it received daily a severe banging from Lucy, whose speed and energy exceeded her competence by about as much as the salary of a competent staff would have exceeded Lucy's wages.

Patricia went to the flowers and raised the bowl so that she could still detect the ghost of their waning fragrance. In her morning dress of blue serge, the collar high and the shape quite simple, she seemed perhaps taller and

slimmer than she had been on the previous night. But she was quite as pretty, and the fresh pink of her rounded cheeks betokened good health. Her hair, which was not long, was arranged to-day as it had been arranged at Monty's party. She was the same girl, but she was graver, because this morning her thoughts were more active and she was therefore more sad.

She remembered old Dalrymple, whom she had met through the agency of Amy, asking her to go to the party with him, and calling for her; she remembered their journey, her entry of the mysteriously charming house, of the studio, her first sight of Monty and instinctive interest in that dark and impenetrable face. And then the noise and brilliance, and Amy, and all the gay talk, and Mr. Mayne. . . . For a long time she was shy of permitting any thought of Harry, as one sometimes leaves the finest peach to the last; and it was delicious to be always almost returning and arriving at Harry, to feel him perpetually there, summonable at impulse, and wilfully to hold thought of him in reserve. Yet in reality it was most often of Harry that she was aware in every wayward turn of memory.

iii

Breakfast was another blow for Patricia. There were bacon and eggs, and both were depressingly cold. The tea was strong and cold. Not so would breakfast be, she decided, in any home truly her own; though if, as she had long ago assumed, her future home were to be one in which servants played a leading part, she had no notion of the way in which cold breakfasts were to be avoided. Were there not such things as spirit lamps? Patricia had not stayed often enough in large houses to know that cold breakfasts are inevitable there unless the

meal is eaten in the kitchen. She merely felt sure that Monty had hot breakfasts. But she did not associate her confident belief with the fact that he was an autocrat with a man-servant. It is the woman's lot to be ill-served wherever she goes. One has only to lunch at a woman's club in London to have this truth emphasised.

So breakfast this morning was a disappointment. Only good digestion—which she fortunately possessed—could have dealt with it effectively. And with breakfast finished, and the dish with solid streaks of grease upon it mercifully concealed by the cracked dish-cover, Patricia wondered what she would do next. She was at leisure, which meant that she was not in a situation; and her ambition exceeded her powers of performance. Her father and mother had both died long ago, and Patricia had lived the greater part of her life with Uncle Roly until his death a year since. He had been a casual man, subsisting from week to week upon a large salary which his habits converted into a small one. What he had done, except to go to an office every day, Patricia had never known; but while she had been with him there had always been plenty to eat, idleness and chocolates for herself, and drinks for Uncle Roly; and a holiday each year at the seaside or in the country. And then he had died, to Patricia's great but quite short-lived grief, and with his death ended the salary from which nothing had been saved. Patricia had exactly two hundred pounds, and the world to face. No relatives barred her path with offers of homes or advice. There followed a situation as typist at a time when even young girls were able to find remunerative situations. Dancing, suburban gaiety, restlessness, and boredom lasted as long as the situation. That too had ended; and Patricia, with only one hundred pounds of inheritance and savings left (for she had not been thrifty, any more than her fellow-

workers and -players had been), was confronted with a new problem.

The alternatives were another situation, which was difficult to find, and a life of vague splendour derived from her talent. Search for the situation being tiresome, and therefore not very sedulously pursued, she was inclined to stake everything upon her talent, as yet unproved. A novel was undertaken—a very autobiographical novel, in which the heroine was extraordinarily charming; and short stories, small poems, little sketches and essays, were all produced from her brain and typed by her busy fingers. When one or two of the stories were accepted and paid for, she had no real fear for the future. She was sanguine with youthful confidence; and her remaining hundred pounds seemed an inexhaustible sum. As she thought of these things Patricia could not help feeling rather conceited. Sometimes, when she dreamed of her ultimate fame, she could almost suppose that those who passed her in the street were already conscious of it.

iv

It was after a day of wasted literary effort, when nothing would come right, that Patricia swept aside all sign of her work, and sought comfort from a visit to Amy. Amy—at least, the adult, as opposed to the child of other days—had first been encountered by accident about a month previously, when she and Patricia had both been shopping. They had stared at each other for a couple of minutes, both half-recognising and half-recognised, and had then pronounced each other's names, reviving a school friendship. Amy, who was alone in the world of London æstheticism by her own choice, and in receipt of an allowance from parents who had plenty of money, was embarked upon an artistic career,

and was trapesing about from publisher to publisher with a large portfolio containing pen-and-ink sketches depicting scenes in "The Vicar of Wakefield" and other classic novels. She thus sought employment as a designer and illustrator. She also made drawings of her friends in water-colour and experimented with oils; but as far as Patricia could see (with the candid eye of a true friend) she spent much of her time in dressmaking and in drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. She wore her hair bobbed, and dressed in loose cretonne frocks and brilliant stockings and shoes that were as much like sandals as anything could be. She had a casual and dissatisfied air, and was developing extreme untidiness under the impression that untidiness was distinguished. That she was happy in her chosen life nobody to whom it was unfamiliar could have supposed; for it held neither security nor romance. On the contrary, it resulted in an aimless see-saw between gregariousness with others equally ego-ridden and amateurishly opinionated about the arts, and solitary days of labour at work which might have been done more competently by those of smaller æsthetic pretensions. Still, this was the sort of society to which Patricia felt herself at this time drawn; and bohemianism in any guise was fascinating for both of them. They became good friends once more. Patricia made her way to the chintz-adorned studio in Fitzroy Street.

Amy, very professional in a long overall with sleeves, carried a brush between her teeth, and a palette over her left thumb, as she opened the studio door in answer to Patricia's mock-peremptory knock.

"Good!" she heartily cried. "Just the one I want. Don't take your hat off for a minute, and turn round. I want to see just exactly how the hair grows."

"All over the place, mostly," said Patricia, as she

obediently turned. The picture in progress stood upon the easel, and represented nothing upon earth. A bloated something without form carried an eye upon its cheekbone. The miracle had been achieved of showing a head upon three sides of its common aspect. Patricia observed it with respect, although she might have been moved to great laughter if she had found it in a child's painting book. She looked crampedly from her stance, as she waited, upon such part of the room as was to be seen. It was not a large studio, but it was lofty, and although a bed stood in the farther corner it was the best combined room she had ever seen. It would be possible, she thought, to be quite happy here. The stained floor was bare except for rugs at the fire and beside the bed, and a large easel stood right under the glass roof. The studio was warm, and so lighted that it appeared to stretch indefinitely into the dusky corners. The only comfortable seats were a big deep armchair and a "podger" which lay against the wall by the side of the fire. Patricia continued to beam upon it as a home for one such as herself. She coveted the studio with a pure and humane covetousness.

"Ye-es," presently came her friend's comment. "All right, thanks. Sit down. Have a cigarette? Well, and you got home all right, did you? With your gay companion."

"He *was* gay!" jeered Patricia. "He hardly said a word."

Amy clucked her tongue. "Too bad!" she observed. "However, you'd have got soaked otherwise. Anyway, it was better than having Dalrymple. Did you ever see such an old toper? It was amazing. Monty won't have him again."

"Oh!" It was a cry of disappointment.

"Oh, that won't matter." Amy was laying down her

palette and searching for matches as she spoke. There was cigarette ash all over the hearth in front of her little gas fire, and ash was scattered across the floor. The bed, covered with bright chintz, showed that she had lain upon it during the afternoon. "You'll be invited without him another time."

"Shall I?" It sent a spark of joy through Patricia to hear this. She looked gratefully at Amy's white face and smooth hair. "Really?"

Amy shrugged with a conceited air of boredom. "You made an impression last night," she announced. Patricia laughed gaily, and Amy continued: "It's easy enough, and it comes naturally to you. Of course, Monty's parties aren't what they were. He used to have a lot of decent people; but he's peculiar, you know. He gets tired of people, and drops them. It's the privilege you enjoy when you've got money. Only of course you've got to keep on making fresh friends, and he's not as bright as he used to be. He used to be able to talk. Now it isn't worth his while; so he says nothing at all. He thinks it. He's sardonic."

"He looks that," agreed Patricia, trying to seem as expert and as patronising as her friend. "But he looks interesting, as well; and that's a great deal."

"Oho! I should think he was. And as clever as the devil. But he's a beast."

"I don't mind that, so long as he isn't beastly to me," said Patricia. "I don't mind what anybody does, so long as they are nice to me."

Amy laughed, and professionally flicked the ash from her cigarette with a little finger. It was a laugh that held dryness.

"Oh, they'll all be nice to you," she observed. "No reason why they should be anything else."

Patricia pondered upon that suggestion, and upon the

strange gleam in Amy's eye. She had so much affection to give, she thought, and she had met so much kindness in others, that there really did not seem to be anything but kindness in her whole life. Even Lucy, in her rough way, was kind. Amy, of course, did not know that, and had not meant to suggest it; but there were things which Patricia still did not understand at sight, in spite of her self-confidence in that direction.

"No," she said. "There isn't, is there. Except that I'm poor; but people don't notice that. Of course, Mr. Mayne was really very kind. But he's rather unbending, I think. He's . . . well, he seemed to me to be rather out of place at Monty's."

So soon had she caught the trick of calling all persons by a Christian name! Amy, from a greater experience, noticed the more naïve satisfaction of Patricia at the habit, and was amused by it.

"Yes. And then there's Harry Greenlees, of course," she prompted, a little inquisitively.

"Yes, Harry. He's awfully nice and amusing," said Patricia. She was instinctively guarded.

"Quite," replied Amy, now very dry. She shot a glance at her friend that hinted suspicion. "You see in that one evening you made three new friends . . ."

There was a pause; and then Patricia, who knew nothing of suspicion, went on:

"Amy . . . do you know Rhoda Flower?"

"In a way. Not well. Just from seeing her at that sort of thing—and hearing about her. She isn't any good."

"What sort of things do you hear?" Patricia had caught that note, at least, and was stung by it to a question. Amy shrugged, since she had no fact to communicate.

"Oh, nothing . . . Nothing *really*. But of course they're always together."

Patricia started slightly. They? Rhoda and Harry.

"Oh, yes," she said, as if merely in acquiescence. "I thought she was pretty, and looked all right."

"Rhoda?" Amy laughed scornfully. "Yes, she's pretty. But she's a fool."

"How d'you mean? Not got any brains?"

"With Harry."

Patricia was puzzled. She just prevented herself from saying "But I thought one did as one liked, without question, in Bohemia."

"What, . . . what, is she in love with him?" she stammered, her eyes wide open.

Amy shrugged, blowing cigarette smoke from her nostrils.

"Oho, I don't know," she said, in a particularly measured voice. "Who knows? It's not the sort of thing one woman tells another unless she is a friend. But she'll burn her fingers with him, you can see. She's not experienced enough at the game. You've only got to look at him to see he's after every fresh face."

It came like a flash to Patricia: Amy's jealous of me! She was aghast and amused in the same instant.

"Oh, well," she cried, with masterly skill. "Who isn't?"

And then Amy and Patricia looked at each other, both smiling, but in conflict as they had not hitherto been. Amy's face was sickly, and there was an extraordinary glitter in Patricia's eyes. Patricia's thoughts leapt quickly forward, skipping all reasons and shades of interpretation. It was not merely of the impression which Patricia had made upon Harry Greenlees that Amy was jealous: it was of Patricia herself, of her power to attract, her intelligence, her freshness. Patri-

cia, even under her horror and her inclination to ridicule such an attitude, was conscious of a sharp accession of complacency. She had entered this new world; she had seen it to be good; she had triumphed with the ease of mastery. It was her fate. She was confirmed in her belief that there was a genuine irresistible *something* in the world called Patricia. Nothing was impossible to her. The chagrins of the morning were obliterated.

v

Presently the two girls busied themselves in preparing a meal in the small kitchen attached to the studio. It was not a feast; but it satisfied them, and Patricia loved the sense of camping out. They ate it off a small round table with a large coloured napkin used as a tablecloth. The crockery was all odd, as Amy had purchased it from a former tenant, and one plate bore upon it the name of a famous hotel. They had an egg dish and some potted meat and some thin claret, with an apple apiece to complete the meal and some coffee which was rather the worse for wear. Amy smoked cigarettes continuously throughout, laying them upon the edge of her plate during mastication. Her consumption of cigarettes during the day was considerable, and she even smoked and read in bed. Patricia made a note of this, as it seemed to be a part of the bohemian life.

"I never noticed this plate before," she suddenly cried, alluding to the one which had upon it the name of the hotel. "D'you suppose it was stolen, or what?"

Amy shrugged, and wiped a small piece of clinging tobacco from her lip with a forefinger.

"May have been," she said. "Or else its a throw-out. You get them cheap in markets, I believe."

"I hope it was stolen," breathed Patricia. "Fancy

eating off a stolen plate! But you'd wonder how any body smuggled anything so large out of an hotel. Awful if it fell!"

"You're perfectly ridiculous, Patricia," said Amy.

What strange eyes Amy had, thought Patricia. They were like big blue-green marbles. They stood out a little. Or perhaps it was only that her eyelashes were fair. Harry had beautiful eyelashes—long and dark; and they made his eyes look charming. She hadn't noticed Edgar Mayne's eyes . . . Oh, yes, she had. They were kind and brown. Funny! The thought of him made her smile; but she had at the same time a curious warming of the heart.

"Isn't it strange," she remarked, thoughtfully, "that you can feel perfectly——"

But what Patricia had been about to commend to Amy's notice was lost; for at that moment there came a tapping at the studio door. Instantly Patricia had one of those celebrated intuitions to which all young women at times are liable. She felt sure that the person knocking was Harry. It proved to be Jack Penton, who came in as though the place were familiar to him, and stood frowning at the signs of their feast. He was as smooth and insignificant as ever.

"Oh," he said, in his rasping voice. "You've had your meal."

"Nothing left for you," answered Amy, brusquely.

Jack's manner in reply was protestingly sullen, as if he had been detected in a fault.

"I was going to ask you to come out to dinner," he grumbled.

"I don't think I *could* eat anything more," smiled Patricia. "It's so nice of you." That was her solace for him, a contribution to what she felt might be a disappointment to so worthy a young man.

"Well . . ." He hesitated. "I've just got along. Erm . . . Look here, I'll go and get something to eat, and come back, if I may."

Amy agreed, and Jack was letting himself out when a notion occurred to her.

"If you meet anybody, bring them with you," she called after him. And when the door had clicked she turned to Patricia. "Don't go, whatever you do . . ." She put her hand to her brow. "That young man . . . He's beginning to be a nuisance."

"What, Jack?" Patricia was full of sympathy for the absent. "But he's most agreeable. I like him."

"Yes," responded Amy, with rather a morose air. "You don't have to put up with him. He's moody. He's got a fearful temper, and he sulks. It's the temperament that goes with that complexion. He's dark and sulky. He hasn't got any notion of . . . He's old-fashioned: . . ."

"Do you mean he's in love with you?" asked Patricia. "That seems to be what's the matter."

"Oho, it takes two to be in love," scornfully cried Amy. "And I'm not in love with him."

"But he's your friend."

"That's just it. He won't recognise that men and women *can* be friends. He's a very decent fellow; but he's full of this sulky jealousy, and he glowers and sulks whenever any other man comes near me. Well, that's not my idea of friendship."

"Nor mine," echoed Patricia, trying to reconstruct her puzzled estimate of their relations. "But couldn't you stop that? Surely, if you put it clearly to him . . ."

Amy interrupted with a laugh that was almost shrill. Her manner was coldly contemptuous.

"You *are* priceless!" she cried. "You say the most wonderful things."

"Well, *I* should."

"I wonder." Amy moved about, collecting the plates. "You see . . . some day I shall marry. And in a weak moment I said probably I'd marry him."

"Oh, Amy! Of *course* he's jealous!" Swiftly, Patricia did the young man justice.

"It didn't give him any right to be. I told him I'd changed my mind. I've told him lots of times that probably I shan't marry him."

"But you keep him. Amy! You do encourage him." Patricia was stricken afresh with a generous impulse of emotion on Jack's behalf. "I mean, by not telling him straight out. Surely you can't keep a man waiting like that? I wonder he doesn't *insist*."

"Jack insist!" Amy was again scornful. "Not he!"

There was a moment's pause. Innocently, Patricia ventured upon a charitable interpretation.

"He must love you very much. But Amy, if you don't love him."

"What's love got to do with marriage?" asked Amy, with a sourly cynical air.

"Hasn't it—everything?" Patricia was full of sincerity. She was too absorbed in this study to help Amy to clear the table; but on finding herself alone in the studio while the crockery was carried away to the kitchen she mechanically shook the crumbs behind the gas-fire and folded the napkin. This was the most astonishing moment of her day.

Presently Amy returned, and sat in the big armchair, while, seated upon the podger and leaning back against the wall, Patricia smoked a cigarette.

"You see, the sort of man one falls in love with doesn't make a good husband," announced Amy, as patiently as if Patricia had been in fact a child. She persisted in

her attitude of superior wisdom in the world's ways. "It's all very well; but a girl ought to be able to live with any man she fancies, and then in the end marry the safe man for a . . . well, for life, if she likes."

Patricia's eyes were opened wide.

"I shouldn't like that," she said. "I don't think the man would, either."

"Bless you, the men all *do* it," cried Amy, contemptuously. "Don't make any mistake about that."

"I don't believe it," said Patricia. "Do you mean that my father—or *your* father . . .?"

"Oh, I don't know. I meant, nowadays. Most of the people you saw last night are living together or living with other people."

Patricia was aware of a chill.

"But *you've* never," she urged. "I've never."

"No." Amy was obviously irritated by the personal application. "That's just it. I say we *ought* to be free to do what we like. Men do what they like."

"D'you think Jack has lived with other girls?"

"My dear child, how do I know? I should hope he has."

"Hope! Amy, you do make me feel a prig."

"Perhaps you are one. Oh, I don't know. I'm sick of thinking, thinking, thinking about it all. I never get any peace."

"Is there somebody you *want* to live with?"

"No. I wish there was. Then I should *know*."

"I wonder if you would know," said Patricia, in a low voice. "Amy, do you really know what love is? Because I don't. I've sometimes let men kiss me, and it doesn't seem to matter in the least. I don't particularly want to kiss them, or be kissed. I've never seen anything in all the flirtation that goes on in dark corners."

It's amusing once or twice ; but it becomes an awful bore. The men don't interest you. The thought of living with any of them just turns me sick."

Amy listened with attention. Her eyes protruded. She tapped her foot upon the floor.

"Yes, but you're not sensual," she said. "You're not an *artist*. Experience is a thing every artist must have. Not a humdrum marriage, and children, and washing books . . . I must have experience—to do great work. . . ."

Patricia's eyes flew to the canvas, now covered, which stood upon the easel.

"But . . ." she began.

"You drive me perfectly mad!" cried Amy, suddenly beside herself with impatience. "You ask questions. You're like a child. You don't know what torment is. You don't know what it is to be bothered the whole time with all this . . . never to get away from it."

"It can't be very healthy," said Patricia. Amy showed her teeth in an angry smile. She did not answer for several minutes, during which her face became set in an expression of discontented egotism.

"Sometimes I think I'll marry Jack just to find out what marriage is like," she said at last. "I could always leave him and go off on my own."

"Poor Jack!" thought Patricia. She said aloud: "He wouldn't like that."

"Oho, he wouldn't be any worse off than he is now."

"He'd be prevented from marrying anybody else."

"If I left him I shouldn't mind what he did," explained Amy. "Of course, he could divorce me."

Patricia thought she had never heard such confident expression of selfishness. It was one thing, she felt, for her to be selfish, because she really *was* wonderful; but to hear Amy speaking as though she had no need to con-

sider others struck Patricia as almost abominable. She was pleased with the word—it was almost abominable. There was a long silence, while their thoughts ranged.

"I certainly don't think you ought to marry him," remarked Patricia. "It wouldn't be fair. You *must* consider him a little. His feelings, I mean."

Amy stretched her legs out in front of her and nestled her head in the corner of the chair. She lighted one cigarette from another, and slowly took two or three puffs.

"You'll find that it's best not to consider other people," she said at length. "They only become a nuisance. I'm kind to Jack, and *he's* a nuisance. I've told him he can go; but he won't go unless I definitely say I won't marry him."

"He's very weak!" exclaimed Patricia, fiercely. "I'm ashamed of him."

"He's not at all weak. He wants something, and he's waiting for it, that's all."

"If you feel like that, surely it shows that you mean to marry him in the end."

"I wonder if I shall," murmured Amy. "Perhaps. Perhaps not . . ."

"I could give you a good shaking!" cried Patricia.

vi

To herself, she thought: "She thinks she's immoral, when she's only conceited. How silly!" And with that she had her first glimpse of Amy's soul. The rapid judgment of others which children possess was still a faculty of Patricia's. Her self-knowledge was rather less. This that Amy indicated was to her an unknown world; but after all she had preserved her own liberty through a number of episodes common to the period in

which she lived. The superficial excitements of dancing partners were not unknown to her, and she had the modern girl's knowledge of things which of old were hidden. Only a quick intelligence had saved her in the past, and she had been made exceptionally confident by experience in her power to deal with whatever situations might arise in her own life. Amy, who looked upon Patricia as a babe, continued to brood upon her trials.

"The men I like," she presently admitted, with candour, "don't seem to like me. The men who attract me. They go for the pretty, dolly woman."

"You're pretty," urged Patricia.

"They don't think so. What's left to me? People like Jack."

"But Amy . . . It *can't* be so . . ." The word Patricia sought was "casual." "I mean, I thought one *knew*—that one either loved a man or didn't." She was pathetically bewildered.

"That's in days when a girl only knew the man she married, and one or two others. It's different now. You know a hundred men—who's to know which is the best of them?"

"Is that how the men feel?" asked Patricia.

Amy stirred in discomfort. She was ill at ease.

"My dear girl, you don't understand," she said. "There's physical attraction; and there's . . . well, there's being pals with a man. But the old ideas of such things are *gone*."

Patricia shook her head. She was hearing of something she did not understand.

"I wish they weren't," was all she could find to say.

"They are!" fiercely cried Amy. "If I were a good girl, living at home, I should marry Jack and be told I'd made a 'suitable match.' But I'm not. I'm on my own. I'm going to have a life of my own. I'm going—I'm

not going to be any man's property. That's finished."

A blank misery seized Patricia.

"I wish you were happy," she murmured. "Oh, I do wish you were." It was the only thing she could say, for she was not learned enough to arrive at any truer explanation than her own unutterable thought of a few minutes earlier.

Sombre dissatisfaction continued to cloud Amy's face.

"Yes," she said. "Of course, you don't understand. You *couldn't*. You've got one of those simple little natures. You're content. You don't know what suffering or temptation is. If a man says he loves you, you're ready to believe him. You're ready to fall in his arms."

"Am I?" inquired Patricia, dangerously. Her indignation was rising.

Amy looked suspiciously at her, too self-absorbed to give more than passing attention.

"You'll see. You're younger than I am. Perhaps you'll learn. Perhaps you'll find out for yourself what suffering is," she admonished, almost with a grim hopefulness.

There came again a sharp tapping at the studio door, and, as if bored almost to lethargy, Amy slowly moved to answer the call. Patricia, instantly alert to recall the injunction under which Jack Penton had departed, imagined hastily that he might have brought another visitor. And for Patricia at this time "another visitor" meant one only. She started at the second voice. Surely it was Harry's. Standing now, she faced the door, and could see beyond Amy to the figures of the two men who entered. First came Jack. There followed Monty Rosenberg.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE REACTION

i

MONTY came into the small studio very much as a tall man enters the saloon of a yacht. His head was lowered, and he produced the impression that all about him was very small. Patricia's first thought of Monty was a disappointed: "Oh, he's fat!" But when his overcoat was laid aside, and he was nearer, she saw that whatever he might become in the future he was still on the slim side of corpulence.

"What a pleasant surprise," murmured Monty. His air caused Jack Penton to appear callow. He was almost mocking to Amy. There was something in the way he held his shoulders, and stood quite still, that made him seem nearly as well-bred as a servant; and yet there was such ease in his manner that Patricia felt he could never in all his life be for an instant discomposed. She envied Monty. She was silent with envy, and her slight shyness, which was expressed by such graceful unconscious shrinking, was an added charm.

"What happened to Dalrymple, Monty?" demanded Amy, as her new guest took the armchair, and smiled down upon Patricia.

"Oh, he went home." Monty had a soft voice, perfectly quiet and smooth; and he almost always raised his inflexion at the end of the sentence, as if he were inviting a response.

"He was drunk," said Amy.

"My dear Amy!" Monty cast a glance of pretended protest which included Patricia, but seemed also to asso-

ciate her in his protest. "There are so many stages of drunkenness."

"A lot of the people were drunk last night. And not jollily drunk, either. They were all white and puffily drunk." Amy was persistent. She was determined—as ever—to speak the truth which was in her.

"How unpleasant," remarked Monty. "But you enjoyed yourself, didn't you, Miss Quin? I hope you'll come again when there is a sober party."

"I'd love to," cried Patricia, sparkling. She was happy again, the perplexities arising from her talk with Amy forgotten. "I thought it was a wonderful party."

Monty ran his eye over her, with the quick certainty of a connoisseur. She was fair, fresh, volatile, beautifully shaped; vain, and therefore to be reached by flattery; over-confident, perhaps, of her power to please; but unspoilt and capable of affording him interest and amusement. He had no interest at all in Amy. She was too crudely egotistical, and she was, besides, too set. Monty could have foretold her expressed opinion (not necessarily her true opinion, since she was often, as he knew, unaware of what she really thought) upon every matter that was likely to come up between them. Neither did she interest him physically: for that she was too hard, and although he supposed her to be sensual she appeared to Monty to lack both mystery and *abandon*. So, although he knew that he could more easily create an artificially-emotional situation with Amy, he gave all his interest to Patricia. There was more in the fresh little new girl, he decided, than in anybody he had recently met. He eyed her appreciatively, as a gourmet may eye a dainty dish. She was interesting. All she did, even if she did nothing but sit quite still upon that enormous cushion beside the gas fire, had grace and personality in it. Especially he noticed that impetuous

mouth, which might betray weakness or instability or reckless bravado, but which could never, he was sure, be associated with tedium. He resolved upon a quick stroke. He saw that Amy and Jack were debating something which removed their attention from his own activities, and so he bent towards Patricia.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed the party. Look here . . ."

He appeared to consider. "I've got a small party on Friday . . . I wonder if you'd like to come to that. I'm afraid . . . Let me see, there are only about half-a-dozen people. . . ." He was thinking as he spoke, and recollecting the names of his guests. "I think the only one you know who is coming is Mayne. You met him, didn't you? Yes, I remember, you went home in his car. Would you like to come?"

Patricia could have jumped for joy. How lovely!

"I should like to come very much," she made herself say very sedately; but Monty was not so inexperienced in these matters as she might have wished him; and she was not altogether sure that her eagerness had escaped his notice.

"That's delightful," he said in his gentle way. "So nice." He was extraordinarily polite and agreeable. And in an instant it was as though that matter were settled and forgotten. Monty rose and went casually to the easel, Patricia watching him in curiosity as he contemplated the monstrous botch. "Yes," he said at last. "I like that. That bit's awfully well-done, Amy." He indicated with a slowly sweeping hand. Amy was by his side, her expression greedily changed. She was avid of this expert flattery, and eagerly receptive. Jack Penton hung behind. He came over to Patricia, stooping to her.

"Do you like it?" He jerked his head at the painting.

"Very much." Patricia was doing her best. She had

not had much experience in catching the true note of art criticism; but a rush of sympathy made her cordial to him, and anxious to say what she imagined he might find in some degree reassuring. Jack shrugged, and took a cigarette-case from his hip-pocket.

"I can't understand it," he said bluntly. "I see an eye, and a blob and a swish; and I can't make it into a picture." He was clearly puzzled and undecided. "I wish I *could* understand it," he went on. "Suppose I'm dull, or something."

"Perhaps it isn't everybody's idea of painting," agreed Patricia, guardedly. "I'm afraid I don't know much about it."

Jack lowered himself to the floor at her side.

"I wish I did," he said. "You know, I'm interested, and all that; and I *want* to like it, because it's Amy's. But I can't, and that's all about it. When a chap like Rosenberg comes along. . . . He's so damned fluent with it all. . . . You see, this is what worries me. He's pulling her leg. He thinks her work's awful."

"Oh! Oh!" came in protest from Patricia.

"It's true," said Jack, gloomily. "They all do. To her face they say this sort of stuff; and when they're away they make fun of it. They just laugh. I wish she'd give it up."

"I *can't* believe . . ." began Patricia, greatly distressed.

"No, you don't want to." Jack's dark face, already thin, seemed to grow haggard. "Imagine what I feel about it. They shut up a bit when I'm there; but nobody thinks she's really any good. And what's to be the end of it? Can *you* see? Can't you imagine her going on, fiddling with this and that—water colours and oils—all drunk with her conceit. And then, what? When she's soured and disappointed she'll . . ." He shrugged.

During the speech his temper had risen, and his tone held a stabbing savageness. "They won't care. They never care about human beings, as we do. They'll laugh, and she'll never know it, but she'll think there's a conspiracy against her. She may go all to pieces; she may pull through. Anything may happen. Sometimes I feel inclined to leave her to it; but I've been in love with her for years—since she was a kid; and I feel I just can't let her drop. She hasn't got a friend in the world except me. Not one that cares if she sinks or swims. Look at her purring, and Monty ladling out the lies. *Look at it!*"

He checked himself as with venom in his urgent tone he drew attention to the two by the easel. Patricia had paled under the fury of his quiet disclosure. The husky voice, which she had previously disliked, was in keeping with his mood and his words, and it therefore assumed new meaning, and her dislike was gone immediately. She saw him as a young man deeply—almost passionately—in earnest, but she was saddened by the picture of such unhappiness as his must be. Her vision of this whole affair became horrible, beyond bearing.

"If her work isn't any good," said Patricia, "surely she'll realise it? She is wise. At any rate, she's shrewd enough to find out the truth, isn't she? If it *is* the truth."

"Never. You don't understand what . . . all this rot"—he waved, vaguely—"means to her. When did a dud—a second-rate person—ever realise his second-rateness? Why, all the really able people I know, or that I've ever heard of, are humble—not that they aren't conceited, too; but it's in a different way. They're humble as well. They've got a sense of their own limitations. They're not like Amy. She's mad about her own cleverness. She calls herself an artist, when it's for other

people to do that. And it's only because she guesses there's a catch somewhere. She feels she's failing, and won't face the reason. There's nothing like success for lowering a person's conceit. She's never had any success—not *real* success. She's got to make it all up inside. Her vanity's all out of control; and if you try to warn her she just flies into a passion and calls you a fool for your pains. She'll *never* have any success. It's impossible, with her temperament."

"Well, then, you mean she's worthless," whispered Patricia, with indignation.

"I'm in love with her," answered Jack, in the same low tone of doggedness. "That's all."

"Isn't it a funny sort of love that decries . . . as you've been doing?" She was still warm with loyalty, to hide the dreadful convincingness of his words.

"You're just a dear little girl, as kind as anything," Jack said. "And you think I'm a cantankerous fool."

"No . . . never that. Oh, no." Patricia made a gesture of uneasiness, her hand almost upon his hand in consolation. "No, I think you're unhappy and bitter, looking at the dark side . . . exaggerating. . . ."

Jack Penton gave a little bitter laugh.

"Exaggerating!" he said. "I wish I was!"

"Then *leave* her. Let her learn. You're only driving her deeper. . . ."

"I can't leave her," he answered, doggedly. "I'm in love with her. I'd go, and she'd call to me, and I'd come running back. See, I'm not a strong chap. Some men could do it. I can't."

"No, no. It's dreadful. Dreadful. I feel helpless. I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry. So *really* sorry."

Patricia was as vehement as he. She was carried right out of her young ignorance, as she often was, by

emotion; and she sat looking at him with a glowing face, her eyes melting in their sympathy. The lines upon that poor grey forehead and round those troubled eyes hurt her, and the bitter droop of Jack's thin dark lips made its direct appeal to her heart, even while that heart sank inevitably at the prospect of unhappiness in life which lay for all to see in front of this bewildered lover. It was at this moment that Amy and Monty, both aware of tension in that other corner of the studio, turned and contemplated their companions. Very strange impressions were recorded by each at such manifest intimacy between the two who were sitting absorbed by the fire.

ii

Upon Monty's side there was a considerable increase of interest in Patricia. It was as though he addressed to himself an appreciative "Ah!" at the sight of a young woman less simple than she appeared. The ideal sport, for him, was to be obtained from freshness that had *savoir faire* behind it. He began to relish this girl. As he scrutinised her his lids were low, and he watched for some betraying gesture of crude sophistication as only an expert could watch. None came. He was the more intrigued. His companion was less passive.

"Well, you two," cried Amy. "Jack's the perfect philistine, of course." She came to the fire, resting her hand upon the mantelpiece, and holding a cigarette forward in her lips for Monty to light. She spoke thereafter with the cigarette in the corner of her mouth and the smoke drifting up into her eyes. "You can explain a thing to him in words of one syllable for hours on end, and at the end he just says, 'Well, I know what I like!' Doesn't turn a hair. Not a swerve. Isn't it marvellous?"

"Why pretend?" suavely demanded Monty. "A great deal of talk about the arts is humbug. It's created by the apparent necessity for saying *something*."

"I agree with you," snorted Jack, who was still ruffled by the recent exploration of his inexhaustible troubles, and who therefore was in danger of being rather less than polite.

"I felt sure you would, my dear Penton," lazily responded Monty. "What we need is standardised criticism. Unfortunately, people are so perverse. They insist on having their own views."

"It's only a pretence," said Jack. "They're all other people's. Unless they're made up for the occasion, in which case they're nobody's."

"When *you* say one thing, and somebody else says the opposite, what happens?" asked Patricia, directly interrogating Monty, and feeling bold in the action.

"I? Oh, the other person's wrong, of course," rejoined Monty, easily.

"Is there no argument?"

"Oh, no!" Monty's "Oh" was merely a quick intaking of the breath.

"It's ill-bred," sneered Jack. "In the æsthetic world there's no argument at all. One just slangs everybody else behind their backs."

"Are you quite well, Penton?" archly inquired Monty. His question made Jack grin; but not altogether with amiability. "I thought you might be ailing."

"Why is it that anybody who speaks the truth is always suspect?" asked Jack, vigorously. "It's extraordinary to me."

"It's because you live in the material world of unreality, my dear Penton. Once you realise that art is the fundamental principle of life, you'll take yourself less seriously."

Patricia thought: one for Master Jack. Is it that he does that? Does he take himself—everything—too seriously? I think so. And what is the material world of unreality? That was the question which Jack was asking aloud.

"The world of phenomena," explained Monty, "is the unreal world."

"The world of seeing and hearing? Well, in that case what tests have we left to us?" Jack was puzzled.

"Nothing," whispered Monty, and began good-naturedly to laugh. "None of these set measures. Only the intrinsic value of everything will stand revealed."

"Pooh!" said Jack. "I wonder what your intrinsic value is, or mine."

"It lies in terms of character, dear boy."

Patricia saw upon Monty's lips the shadow of contempt. She saw that, imitatively, Amy was reflecting just such an expression. She sighed. In terms of character! Well, why should Monty be so confident that the superiority lay with him? And why Amy? She almost laughed in their faces—not as a token of amusement, but as a protest. The word "booh!"—with its immediate implications—would have expressed her feeling. They were only complacent because they had quicker brains than Jack. As though quickness of brain mattered! She had it herself, by starts, and was quite abreast of their comments.

"What's character?" demanded Patricia.

"My dear child!" expostulated Amy, screwing her face under the smarting onset of cigarette smoke.

"Well, what is it?" This time it was Jack, dangerously bellicose.

"It's what everybody thinks they've got," said Patricia.

"When they haven't got it," added Jack.

"Oh, not nowadays," urged Monty, correcting that

assumption with a quite lordly indifference. "We're all so self-conscious."

"I mean . . ." Jack was at a loss. Patricia's brain supplemented his deficiency; but she had not the courage to say her thoughts aloud. He meant that it was not of character that people were vain. It was of accomplishments; of quickness, skill, beauty. And yet . . .

"It all goes much deeper than you think," she announced; and by provoking sharp laughter from them all by this profundity, Patricia saved the argument about reality from becoming a real argument. It was a lively contribution to the evening.

"A philosopher!" cried Monty, in his slow, rather jeering way, very easily and as if all views were one to him.

"Very well: we'll see," thought Patricia. Rebelliously, she was aware of power within herself transcending all quickness and all agility. It was the power in virtue of which she was peculiarly Patricia. She had not caught more than the faintest glimpse of the fact that Monty had been playing with them all, and that his interest during the whole of the discussion had been concentrated upon the changes of expression to be noted in rapid progress across Patricia's very readable face.

iii

"You *must* have honesty," grumbled Jack. "It's all so simple. If a chap's honest and decent, his cleverness doesn't matter. That's what you mean by character, I take it."

"That's what *you* mean," suggested Monty.

"If a man's a liar . . ."

It was here that Patricia interrupted Jack for his salvation.

"Jack: don't be logical," she pleaded. "You couldn't convince anybody by logic."

He gave a gesture of despair.

"That's just it," he sighed. "That's what I complain of, nowadays. There's all this damned affected cant against sense. People first find out what they ought to do, and then do something else, in case they should be suspected of sense."

Amy and Monty were no longer listening. Patricia gave Jack a warning glance. What he said, so far as she understood it at all, appeared to be ridiculous.

"I must go." Monty rose. He bent over Patricia. "You'll come on Friday. At eight o'clock? Splendid." Neither of the others heard him. Swarthy and regal, he moved slowly into his overcoat and swept them a slight bow upon leaving. With his going, there went from the studio, for Patricia, all vividness of interest. She was prepared to look with distaste at both of her remaining companions. To them the inevitable squabble might be—must be—of importance, but she felt she was tired of them. They bored her. They took themselves too seriously. It was all thoroughly ugly and absurd. People with only one idea!

She waited, enduring the opening stages of a wrangle.

"My dear Jack. Why you must make a fool of yourself . . ." began Amy, as soon as the door had closed. The trouble continued. Saying nothing, Patricia put on her coat.

"I'm going," she announced, curtly; and left them to their self-important disagreement.

iv

On the way home, Patricia thought much of what she had heard during the evening from both Amy and Jack.

By a strange chance, she had heard in the same hour both sides of an unhappy conflict; and this must always be a depressing experience. It set a weight upon her heart during the whole of her journey. She saw Jack, incapable of measuring his words with tact; honest, puzzled, commonplace; she saw Amy selfish and shortsighted; without talent, sure of her own rightness and cleverness. Patricia did not know that in each estimate her mind was quite naturally registering the adverse statements which had been made to her by the prejudiced parties.

She turned into the street in which her home lay, and for the first time knew that the hour must be late. The houses were all dark. In her own house, above the door, she could see only the faintest of lights, which must be that of her little bedroom lamp. Patricia shrank, laughing to herself, at the thought of her landlady's views on successive late nights. Disapproval! Well, she must get used to that sort of thing. In future there might be many late nights. Parties of every kind danced before her. Patricia, living for herself, and venturing forth into this new world of vivid personality and adventure, was above fear of what any landlady might think. The lure of anti-conventionality was before her. She laughed quietly in enjoyment of its charm.

Nevertheless, she opened the front door with stealth. Her expectation as to the scene which was to meet her eyes was fulfilled. Before her, upon the hall-table, stood the little lamp, turned very low in case it should smoke. Cavernous blackness lay along the passage, towards the kitchen stairs; and above, where she must herself go, was a drab shadow towards which she must not, for courage's sake, look too sensitively, lest it be peopled with imagined horrors. Grey ceilings receded into the dimmest of distances. Patricia closed the door, feeling

upon her cheeks a little warmth from the atmosphere of the house and its most recent meal. Something very small and white lay upon the table immediately beside the lamp; and with the thought that it must concern herself she picked it up at once. Her heart gave a sudden throb. Almost, her lips trembled. She gazed at the card over which she was bending; and the mood of unhappiness swept again upon a heart that had already been deeply troubled in the course of the evening.

Then, slowly, Patricia took her lamp and went up the stairs, Harry's card between her fingers.

CHAPTER FIVE: EDGAR MOVES

i

BUT however miserable Patricia may have felt at night, she rose rewarded in the morning; for upon her breakfast-table she found a letter in an unknown handwriting. She pounced upon it with a lifting of the heart. "Miss Patricia Quin," she read. The handwriting was small and flowing, firm and curly. All the capital letters were large and beautifully formed; and yet there was a carelessness and grace in the general style which charmed her. The post mark she could not decipher. With sudden resolution, Patricia tore open the envelope, her intuition for once the infallible intuition of every woman's dream.

"Dear Patricia. Sorry you were not in when I called. What about coming out to dinner and to dance afterwards on Saturday? I suggest the Marnier, seven-thirty sharp; and then on to either, Topping's or the Queensford. Yours ever, Harry."

Patricia gave a low laugh, and read the letter through a second time. How lucky that she would have a new dress! She sat down at once, with her notepaper and pen, biting the end of the pen as she planned the reply.

"Dear Harry," she wrote. "Splendid. Marnier, seven-thirty. Then which ever you like. I've never been to either. Yours ever, Patricia."

She carefully sealed the envelope, and wrote the address in a handwriting as near that of Harry as her natural penmanship allowed. She was still contemplating the letter and re-reading her invitation when Lucy kicked the door open and stamped into the room, kicking the door back again with her heel. Both sides of the door showed signs of Lucy's regular methods. With raw and dirty hands Lucy dumped down the meal.

"Cole," she remarked agreeably. "Young man come for you larce night, tole me to say he's sorry to miss you."

"Yes, thank you."

"Gotcher letter, then," said Lucy.

"Yes, thank you, Lucy." Patricia was trying to be sedate; but the sharp grey eyes of Lucy, which shone from above red cheeks and a snub nose and a grimy neck, were inexorable.

"Thought he'd write," said Lucy. "I ses, 'Can I take any message?'—you know, sweet as sugar. He gimme a card. Wouldn't leave no message. Fine lookin' young man, he was."

"I expect you were very excited," said Patricia, dryly—even, she hoped, quellingly. Lucy stood looking down at her, very sturdy and determined.

"What say?" she asked. Patricia repeated her remark. Lucy turned abruptly. "No," she said, over a raised shoulder. "But I thought *you* would be."

She was gone, leaving Patricia faintly pink.

ii

Although cold, it was a fresh morning. The clouds had gone, and the sky was blue. Patricia—having eaten her breakfast and hurried exultingly out of doors—felt a strong temptation to run along one of the streets leading riverwards. She could imagine herself standing

upon the Albert Bridge and looking down at the swiftly-moving Thames. A fine breeze would be sweeping there. She would be able to pretend that she was at sea. How stern Patricia must be with herself! She vigorously maintained her course along the King's Road, towards Sloane Square, and there made her purchases. She thought: "I'm not like these other women. I know what I want. They stand fingering stockings for half-an-hour. I suppose it's a hobby. I simply ask for what I want. And get it."

This made her seem to the assistant who served her somewhat peremptory. Patricia took no interest in shop-assistants when she bought material for a dress for herself. She thought she did; but although she became indignant—vicariously—at thought of shop-assistants' wages, she did not really acknowledge that in relation to herself they had any existence. She retired from the shop with approximately what she had entered for the purpose of buying; and the assistant watched her go with an air of some preoccupation. As another assistant near her was doing the same thing, the two gathered together in order to discuss Patricia. They appeared to rub noses, as kittens might have done; mournfully and confidingly, holding conversation in a whisper, and separated only at the entrance of another customer.

"Yes, moddam?" inquired Patricia's shop-assistant, with mechanical address.

Patricia was far down the King's Road, carrying her parcel.

"I should hate to be a shop-assistant," she impulsively thought. "It must be a rotten life, attending to people who don't know what they want, and stand fingering stockings for half-an-hour, and then buy a reel of cotton. They like me, because I know what I want."

She could not help being rather pleased with herself.

iii

Now, while Patricia was busy making her dress, and forgetting altogether that she was going to meet him on the Friday night, Edgar Mayne, who did not even know that the meeting was to occur, was working quietly in his office, transacting business in which he had only a material interest. Edgar was one of those men, of whom there are many, who made money without deliberately intending to do so. It was true, as Harry had announced at the party, that Edgar had begun life as an office boy. He had left school at the age of fourteen, and had answered advertisements until one of them brought a favourable reply. He had begun life by copying letters by means of damp sheets and a press; and he had been promoted a year later to a junior clerkship. He had no interest in figures beyond that which natural aptitude could supply. He had none of the born accountant's delight in their possibilities. Solely, he brought to his accounts a character naturally precise, and with similar ease he could at this time have directed his intelligence to many other matters. If Edgar's parents had been wealthy, he would have had a complete education, and his gifts would have promised a great career; but they were poor, and themselves ill-educated, and so it became necessary that Edgar should early add something to the weekly budget. He did so.

From one competence he advanced to another. By the time he was thirty, Edgar was manager of the business, which dealt in the importation of those goods which English people require from abroad, and the exportation of goods produced in England for which there was a foreign market. He never saw the goods in bulk; but he saw samples of them and was furnished with myriads of catalogues specifying their quality and the current

market rates at which they were to be bought and at which they were being sold. By means of occasional visits abroad, by more frequent interviews and excursions in England, Edgar grew to considerable knowledge of prices and conditions of manufacture. His advice was thus demanded by those directing the firm, who presently invited him to become one of their number. With increase of business came increase of income and power; and as Edgar's interests extended he found himself at thirty-seven a man of some wealth, who had at the same time a considerable standing among those able to appreciate his commercial acumen.

During this time his family had shared his progress. His father no longer worked; his mother directed the household, but no longer laboured upon her knees to keep it clean and neat. His younger brother, if he had not been killed in the War, would have benefited equally; while his young sister Claudia stayed at home and amused herself and everybody else very much by a display of housewifely virtues for which many others girls of her period, even if they have the inclination, can find nowadays no opportunity. The family, having spent miserable years in a place called West Hampstead, had moved seven years before the opening of this story to Kensington, where they occupied a small house and spent an agreeable, if aimless, existence. The elders, who were proud of Edgar, feared him a little; his sister, proud also, feared him not at all. It was she, in fact, who had kept Edgar human; for without her he might either have become lost in his business or have married some tepid young woman who herself had cast the die.

The household consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Mayne, Claudia, Edgar, Pulcinella (a small but irrepressible Cocker Spaniel), Percy (a cat with a character), and a cook and maids who were both respectfully spoiled by

Mrs. Mayne. The servants despised Mrs. Mayne, and idolised her children. There was nothing which Claudia might not do without fault; and Edgar was so unobtrusively tended that he was almost unaware of the devotion which breathed firmly from the kitchen. He went his way, liking very simple things and dealing with them as they arose; and none knew the secret chagrin which lay always in his solitary heart.

iv

This chagrin was nothing less than loneliness. He did not easily make friends. His office work had so occupied his time and energy that Edgar had become rather shy in company. And so, while Claudia had a few friends, he had none. Claudia's friends seemed to him to be dull little boys and girls, for Claudia was a good deal younger than himself; and although he was amused when one or other of them was timidly pert to him they combined together to make him feel old. He had the reputation of a born celibate. Work, therefore, and more work, kept him rather staid. Edgar's fear was that he might dry up altogether before he had ever had time to live. With a warm heart, an eager sympathy, and a manner so reserved and shy that it gave the appearance of coldness, he was in danger—not, as he thought, of drying up, but of making some ridiculous plunge into emotionalism which might wreck his life.

Since the night of Monty's party, Edgar had thought much of Patricia. It did not please him to think of her in the rather sophisticated company of those who had gathered at Monty's. She was clearly delighted with these people, and they were a danger to her purity. Edgar thought more of Patricia during that week than of any other person. He liked her. He would have liked

to help her—oh, always unobtrusively, so that she could not be embarrassed by his help;—but also not perhaps quite as impersonally as he supposed.

It was therefore with a start of delight and surprise that Edgar, upon arriving at Monty's house, found that Patricia was to be his neighbour at dinner.

v

His car had been behaving erratically *en route*, which is a way cars behave when they ought to be in perfect order; and therefore Edgar strode into the house with grimy hands, and kept the party waiting for several minutes while he washed. At last, hot and irritated, he joined the others, to find only Patricia, Monty, some people called Quellan, and Blanche Tallentyre. All were sitting or standing in a small drawing room, and dinner was immediately announced. Upon his left Edgar found Mrs. Quellan, a fair, large woman, originally thin and raw-boned, who was accumulating undesired and undesirable plumpness; and who wrote books for boys under a masculine pseudonym. Upon his right was Patricia, from whose dress all except one tiny white thread had been removed at exactly the moment when she should have begun her journey. The thread caught her eye as they sat down. It also caught Edgar's eye, which was not unused to such sights.

"I might have called for you if I had known you were coming," he said, unfolding his napkin.

"If you had, I should have kept you waiting," responded Patricia, with a small grimace.

"Were you busy up to the last minute, then?"

"Beyond that!" They laughed together.

Then Edgar glanced round the handsome room with its high and painted ceiling and its curiously severe walls

of luminous grey. It was not a warm-looking room. There were no pictures; but the furniture was old and good. The table at which they sat was circular, and the light above caught all the brilliances of glass and silver ware, while it increased the cold darkness of the walls.

"Do you know these people?" he next asked.

"Mrs. Tallentyre was at the party. Isn't she unhappy-looking?"

"Perhaps it's only her manner." Edgar strove to make his tone light; for his assumptions were otherwise.

"No. It's real." They both verified the impression. To Edgar it appeared that Mrs. Tallentyre made adroit use of cosmetics; but they heightened the hard glitter of her eyes, and the markedly anxious vivacity of her manner. Patricia resumed: "Her husband was at the party. A horrid man."

Well: Edgar wondered what she was doing here at all, sitting at Monty's left hand and talking to Quellan as if she had something to gain from him. Mrs. Quellan, fortunately, was engaged with Monty. Jacobs, having served the soup, was at the sideboard with the decanters under his eye.

"I wish I'd known you were coming," Edgar said, rather lamely.

"I was told you'd be here." Patricia was perhaps roguish. "I've been feeling that I must have been rather silly. . . . I didn't thank you. . . ."

"Oh, no. . . . I'd been thinking. . . ." Edgar broke off.

"I met . . . Mr. Rosenberg at Amy Roberts's the night after the party, and he asked me then. Amy Roberts was at school with me."

"Is she . . . some sort of artist? Forgive me . . ."

He saw that Patricia was laughing; but it was at a swift association of his stumbling enquiry with the monstros-

ity which stood upon Amy's easel. "I'm altogether ignorant of painting and reputations." Edgar could not have expressed the curious happiness which pervaded him at the sight of Patricia's laughing face. The new curve of her cheeks in laughter, and the poise of her head, were all delicious to him. Some reflection of his feeling must have appeared in his eyes; for she sobered, almost responsive to his admiration.

"I don't think anybody knows her work," explained Patricia. Something like sorrow transformed her face. She was recalling Jack and his miserable confessions. "Mr. Rosenberg was praising a picture she's now painting when he was at the studio."

"You like it yourself?"

Patricia looked frankly back at him. There was something in Edgar which invited the truth. She felt strongly tempted to tell him the whole story of Jack. How strange that she should feel at once so intimately friendly!

"I don't know," she admitted. Then, quite astonished at herself, she went breathlessly on: "You see, I don't know anything about pictures; and I want to seem to know. It isn't pretence . . . or not altogether. I want to understand. But Amy's so difficult, and you can't ask her to tell you why something that's very ugly, from one point of view, is really good from another. I don't mean that I like sentimental pictures. I hate them. But you need educating to appreciate the sort of things Amy does."

Unconsciously, Patricia had drawn the attention of Monty, at the other side of the round table. He had missed the opening words of her speech; but he had heard the conclusion.

"You need no education, Miss Quin," he cried. "She simply isn't an artist."

Patricia flushed deeply.

"I thought you were . . . were praising her the other evening," she said, indignant and breathless, her face alight with vivacity. She was obviously loyal, obviously in earnest, and in such company demanding to be teased.

Monty's wicked smile made the others laugh.

"One must be polite, of course," he said.

"You think she's bad?" demanded Patricia. "I mean, you think her work is bad?"

"Terrible." They laughed again.

"But you praised her. Why do you let her go on?"

"One lets *everybody* go on. You can't stop a runaway car or a deluded woman."

Patricia glanced aside at Edgar.

"You think that?" she asked him before them all.

"It would hurt her to be told the truth. She wouldn't believe it, I suppose," he said. "If it would do any good, certainly tell her; but only a close friend whose judgment she valued would do good."

"Nobody, my dear Mayne. Amy Roberts couldn't understand." This was from Monty, who had his dark eyes fixed upon Patricia's every change of expression with a concentration not to be misread.

"She's my friend, you see," urged Patricia. "I hate to think of her being . . ."

"It'll do her good to find out for herself," said Blanche Tallentyre, with a snap.

Across the table Patricia stared a little at Blanche.

"I wonder," she answered, ruthlessly. "Aren't there quite enough unhappy women in the world, who've found out too late?"

It was strange that this was the first sign of temper she had shown. Blanche's eyes, as filled with miserable sophistication as a monkey's, glittered at the thrust. Her haggard cheeks showed no sign of emotion; but her lips

were tightly pressed together. They parted to make retort, but were again sealed. Patricia hardly guessed, because she did not care, that she had made an enemy.

vi

While Patricia ignored the outcome of her remark, Edgar was not unaware of it. He had *felt* the electric silence which followed the speech, had seen Blanche's glitter, and had not been unprepared for the look of slow and comfortable malicious enjoyment which crossed Monty's face. To Edgar the truth was apparent. There was danger in the air. Dalrymple was not the only possible danger. Nor Harry Greenlees. Edgar was quietly alarmed. There was always danger; but in Patricia's case it was acute. She had done herself no good by that instant's admission of the power to hurt. She had roused Blanche's animosity, and had heightened Monty's interest in herself. With what assurance he could master, Edgar withdrew her from the general circle and demanded her personal interest.

"I have a sister rather younger than you," he said. "I should like you to meet her."

Patricia turned to him, her darkening obliterated.

"Is she very nice? And pretty?" she begged.

"Both," asserted Edgar. "She's very spirited, and slangy, and good-tempered. She's a great tease. And she's clever."

"And alarming!" cried Patricia, ruefully.

"Then I've been unjust to her. She's alarming, because she's unexpected. But I think you'd like her."

"Would *she* like *me*?" The question was not all coquettish.

Edgar smiled; and thereby caused Patricia to smile in return.

"I should like you to meet her," he said.

He was not wholly absorbed, even now, in Patricia. He could see Mrs. Quellan, growing slightly plump, but struggling against middle-age and natural gracelessness with all the energy of those whose youth has been lost in work and anxiety. He could see her husband, thin-haired, pale, and elaborately cheerful over suppressed care. He could see Blanche, so obviously what she was at that table, aged beyond her years, her spirit tired and malignant. And Monty, full of well-being and will and calculation, relentless and immovable in his design. The one fresh and unwarped spirit was Patricia. She was youth incarnate. She had vitality denied to all the others. And she was helpless through inexperience. She was over-confident, warm-hearted, blind.

Edgar shrugged slightly. He also was not without will.

"Yes," he said, quietly. "You must certainly meet Claudia."

vii

At the end of the evening, when they were in the car together, Patricia said:

"I feel sorry for Blanche Tallentyre; but I hate her."

"Well," replied Edgar. "Don't you think she may hate you, as well?"

Patricia did not speak. She was puzzled. She thought for some time before she answered him.

"I meant, I don't think Blanche Tallentyre can ever really have been . . ." She paused.

"Young? Oh, I think . . . I think perhaps you were more right about her than you knew," said Edgar.

"I found myself saying that," naïvely admitted Patricia. "I didn't mean to hurt her at all."

"No," answered Edgar. "That was the devil of it.

You never *do* mean to hurt or to do wrong, do you?" He laughed, which showed Patricia that he was not finding fault with her. "But I pity anybody who tries to make you do right."

"Well, you see, I'm . . . I'm Patricia Quin," said Patricia, as though that were an all-sufficient justification of any idiosyncrasy.

"Quite so." Edgar was silent in his turn. Yet he was shot through and through with an impulse either to kiss her or to strike her; and he continued methodically to drive his car through the after-theatre traffic as though no such possibilities could ever have occurred to him. Patricia, wholly unconscious that he was anything but the quiet and composed creature whom she saw, basked in her delusion.

"I should think you must be an awfully good friend," she impulsively said.

"Should you?" Edgar's tone was expressionless. He did not relax his attention to the traffic.

No more was said between them upon that subject.

CHAPTER SIX: EVENING WITH HARRY

i

HALF-PAST SEVEN, and the appointed restaurant. A revolving door, brilliant lights, warmth, a general air of opulence; and Patricia found herself in a small entrance hall, at one side of which attendants wrested their outer garments from all men. She had noticed before that no man may enter a restaurant with his hat and coat, although a woman may sit in her furs all the evening; but she had never understood the meaning of this differentiation between the sexes. Before her, several people were sitting, as if waiting for others; and in a fireplace glowed what she at first took to be a real fire. A sandy young man was perched upon the edge of a chair, gnawing his under-lip, and ever and again flirting his wrist out of his sleeve as he checked the lateness of a friend. Two highly refined women talked in loud voices about their private affairs, extraordinarily self-conscious in face of the sandy young man. They broke off in order to stare at Patricia in a well-bred manner, and resumed their conversation in a slightly lower key. The young man looked again at his wrist-watch.

Patricia, for her part, was frowning. She was punctual, because she was always punctual. And she expected any host to be punctual also. Harry's lateness, when she had arrived so eager, chilled her. She stood hesitating, only half-aware of those others who were in the small room with her. She had imagined something very different—an arrival, and Harry's greeting as eager as her

own. When she had so carefully refrained from the coquetry of lateness it was only right that he should have done the same. She was chagrined. There came back into her mind—by what connection she could not have said, since she was only half-conscious of her own flying sensations—memory of her distaste for his jokes about personal cleanliness.

And while she stood there, a little wavering, all her doubts were dispersed. There was drawn across every unpleasant thought an oblivion so complete as to be annihilating. Patricia had seen the half-filled restaurant through the bevelled glass panes of another door, and had been aware of a muffled noise of conversation and the sounds common to all restaurants; and as she waited she saw a quick movement of black and white. The door was burst open. The black and white, so tall as to be unmistakable, gave place in her eyes to Harry's sparkling countenance. He was at her side, as full of verve as he had ever been in the football field, delightfully impetuous.

"Hul-lo!" he cried in greeting. "I say, I'm so sorry! I was just ordering the dinner. It's only just half-past, isn't it?"

Patricia was electrically happy. The life in her responded to the life in him. They were two vital creatures, meeting and delighted; and as she went with him into the restaurant those diners who were conveniently placed were all moved to attentiveness at the sight of such health and radiance. With her spirits mounting to expectation itself, Patricia suffered the waiters to wedge her behind a small table which Harry had reserved in the corner of the shining golden restaurant. She was dazzled by a thousand lights and reflections, her heart dancing, and her eyes so dangerously tender that she instinctively withheld them from Harry's inspection.

"I say!" exclaimed Harry. "This is superb, you know!" He was looking at her brilliant dress, upon which nobody had thought to make any comment on the previous evening. "I've never seen anything to beat it." The dress was quite plain; but the taste which had planned it was manifest. Both the material from which it was made and the delicate silk with which its adornments had been fashioned were sun-coloured. Every light made it richer, more simple, more effective. He was full of admiration. Patricia was rewarded. She knew now that she had thought of Harry all the time she had been employed in the long task of preparing the dress. She made no reply. He resumed impetuously: "I could have murdered that girl of yours the other night. Somehow I'd reckoned on finding you at home."

"I was at Amy's."

"Oh!" He was astonished. "I almost went on to her."

"Monty and Jack Penton were there, too. They came in after dinner."

Harry frowned. It was his turn to do so. But it was not a very serious frown, as Patricia, glancing sideways, could see.

"Oh, the old fat man!" he lightly commented. "I don't know Penton. I mean, I've met him, but I can't remember him."

"Did you go and see Mr. Mayne?"

Harry shook his head.

"No. I wasn't serious. One can't push one's self." His teeth showed, not in a smile, but as if in some habitual expression. "He's not my sort."

"He's very kind."

Harry laughed.

"Exactly," he said. His eyes were upon her, so eager as to be devouring. "You know, I'm most awfully glad you could come to-night. I've got all sorts of things to tell you."

"I wish," murmured Patricia, "I wish you'd tell me why men have to leave their overcoats at the door of a restaurant."

His voice was lowered. His eyes roved for an instant.

"It's so that they can cut a figure," he explained. "A man in his overcoat—oh, a sorry sight. A woman—it's so different. She's got to keep her shoulders warm. She's got to show her furs to everybody. By the way, where are yours?"

Patricia regretfully shook her head.

"You have to imagine them," she ventured.

"They're the finest here," Harry assured her. "It's all simply a question of decoration. And also, no doubt, of tips. You see, a woman is entertained."

"I never understand why *that* is," cried Patricia. "I'd far rather always pay for myself. I do, as a rule."

"Not with me," said Harry, with a sudden firmness which she admired. "You don't want to with me, do you?" He was confident; but he spoke truly. She had no will to flout him.

A shyness fell upon them. They ate for a moment in silence. After all, they did not know each other very well; and it may have occurred to each that part of the lightness of the conversation was due to a kind of defiance of constraint. Their moods, however, were in harmony; as was testified by the exchanged smile which succeeded the silence.

"Are you a *good* dancer?" demanded Patricia. Harry laughed again.

"I didn't bring my testimonials," he answered. "Did you?"

"I brought my shoes." She was quite ready for him. "If you're a bad dancer I shall be shocked."

"You needn't worry," said Harry, calmly. "The question is, can *you* dance?"

Patricia thought: How splendid! How splendid! Her glance was roguish and evasive, so perfect did the understanding between them appear to be. Aloud, she very demurely responded:

"We'd better both hope for the best, hadn't we? It's no good meeting trouble half-way."

iii

They found themselves autobiographical in a very short time. Patricia was made to give a sketch of Uncle Roly and others; and Harry detailed some of the more amusing episodes of his youth. He had been born in the country, it seemed, and had lived in the country until he was sent away to school. Patricia rejoiced. Some of her own early memories were of the country, and with her fancy quickened by the occasion she followed Harry's narrative with what she felt sure he must recognise as perfect understanding. He pictured the district in which he had lived, making little strokes in the tablecloth with his dessert knife in order to give her a rough notion of the scenes amid which he had played.

"That's the hut," he said. "The ditch was along here. Trees, you know . . . and the road here. That hut was a real treasure. One never gets tired of that sort of place. It suits every game, and every weather. We slept there sometimes in the summer, in hammocks slung across. It's a queer thing to sleep out of doors in the midst of all the night noises."

"Is it alarming?" asked Patricia. She was thinking of things inexplicable.

Harry's eyes opened. He did not understand her.

"Oh, no," he said. "I only meant, queer to listen to the jolly old owls, and things."

"Had you got a river near you?" She resented his misunderstanding; but for an instant only.

"You mean, boating? No, not near. There were streams, and bits of water; but nothing big enough for boating. We used to bathe. Jove, they were days! Of course, I get some of the old pleasures now by tramping. I started it before the war, and went back to it directly I got out of uniform. There's nothing to beat the road, if one doesn't mind roughing it. You go along and along, and haven't anything to tie you to a place or a bed. You get meals where you can, and tumble in for a rest where you can, and come home when you like, and go where you like. Even now it's quite decent, so long as your passport is all right and you don't mind taking what you can get."

"And when you were a little boy, were you naughty?"

"Yes. And were you a naughty little girl?"

"No. I was a good little girl."

"What, *never* naughty?" His face was full of incredulity.

And so the meal progressed, and the friendship was enhanced by every piece of observation which either of them directed at the other. Seen close at hand, as Patricia knew already, Harry had all the attractiveness which belongs to good health and physical vigour. All his movements were definite, his eyes were clear and his glances assured. His hair was crisp, his colour good, his frame large and impressively well-knit. He had played forward for the Harlequins, in a pack that was both heavy and quick, a team that owed its triumphs not only to great generalship but also to the speedy adroitness of its individual members. And in spite of

his years Harry was still a man of sure and rapid action. At all points he charmed Patricia.

Patricia charmed him no less. That which in him was quick and vivid found its counterpart in her. If they had had nothing intellectually in common, still their proximity would have brought happiness to both. But in addition Patricia was nimble of wit, and intrigued Harry's interest in that respect also. She was as quick as he was, and sometimes she was quicker than he. Harry could see the play of expression upon her face during the whole time that he was talking, and the play showed that she had no mental inertia, and no single inability to comprehend the meaning of all he said. Harry was quite used to the skill with which a more ignorant girl would manifest understanding of which she was incapable. He knew that in Patricia's case it was the real thing. So speaking a face could not deceive. And perhaps he did moreover "receive fair speechless messages" which increased his ardour and his already dominating confidence. He was very happy. They both were very happy, and their happiness added lustre to the beauty of both.

iv

"Where are we going after dinner?" Patricia demanded suddenly. She had declined a liqueur, and was finishing her last cigarette. Already the restaurant was half-empty of those diners who had proceeded to theatres. The remainder sat on, talking. She could see the two highly bred women of the lounge in the company of two glossy-haired men in evening dress. Neither man, she recognised with satisfaction, could compare with her own escort. And so the manner of her inquiry had been complaisant as well as calm.

"It's for you." Harry set down his liqueur glass.

"The Queensford's the more genteel; and there's a better band at Topping's. Floor's about the same at both. The Queensford's larger."

"Is Topping's *low*?" she sparkled. "Let's be low."

"Right." He called the waiter.

"If it's not far, let's walk there," said Patricia. "It's such a beautiful night."

The mirror at her side gave back a reflection of what she knew to be an excited and even slightly flushed face. But she could not fail to be charmed by her own prettiness as she rose and went towards the door with Harry. The refined ladies and their escorts abandoned conversation as Patricia passed, which gave her further satisfaction. She knew that they could none of them withhold curiosity and perhaps admiration. Well, wasn't that quite pleasant to Patricia? She had no fault to find with her situation.

They were in the street, and in the piercing whiteness of electric light. The air was very crisp, and she welcomed its cold touch upon her cheeks. There were taxicabs and newspaper sellers and loitering people; and a huge omnibus went heavily by. Crowds were thinner than they had been early in the evening, but every face was whitened by the light, bleached to the colourless gravity of a kinema film. Above, very distant in the most lovely of blue night skies, was the moon, silver to the eye, very pure and remote. Patricia looked up at the moon, smiling her love for it, so much did that silent shape draw wonder from her heart; and in doing this she unconsciously moved into Harry's path. He took her arm for an instant's guidance, and, as they approached the crossing of Piccadilly, he retained his hold. It was all nothing, and she was free again when they reached the other side of the street; but the protection had been so natural ~~that~~ that it gave her pleasure. She

walked by Harry's side with a thousand beautiful little memories and emotions and imaginings making what she knew to be happiness in her heart.

And then they were at Topping's; and she could hear the band. Other young people stood about on the broad stairs—fluffy-haired girls and well-groomed young men, all with that curious excited expression in their eyes which went with late hours and noise and nervous exhaustion. Patricia felt her feet begin to catch the strongly marked rhythm, and went quickly to change her shoes and leave her coat. She was out again upon the stairs before Harry had returned; and stood there listening, her breast rising and falling rather fast, a piquant figure, both light and graceful, so fresh in that brilliant light that she drew the attention of all who were near.

She was still waiting when two people came down the stairs from the street towards her, both cloaked and muffled against the cold. For an instant she did not recognise them; but as Monty took off his hat and moved away to the men's cloak-room Patricia was recalled to memory with a start. Evidently Monty had not seen her. Swiftly she looked at the on-coming figure of his companion. A cold greeting was exchanged, surprise rather than pleasure being obviously the emotion upon both sides. Patricia followed the newcomer with her eyes until she was hidden; and her brain was engaged with a problem.

Monty. Monty . . . and Blanche Tallentyre. How strange.

v

Patricia was not allowed further time to ponder this singular meeting, for Harry was once again at her elbow. He had not seen Monty, but was eager to be dancing. They descended the remaining stairs. There was a good

deal of noise, not only from the band, but from the dancers and, even more, from those who were still dining in that part of the very large room which was set apart for the purpose. Patricia could see that girls and men were at many of the small tables, smoking and drinking, and that it was the custom for them to leave their places in order to dance and to resume them when the music stopped. She had a few moments to examine the throng; for exactly at the instant of their arrival the band quickened its pace for the end of the dance which she had heard in progress. Couples dispersed, and there was a crowded and dishevelled scene which took her breath away. All sorts of girls in all sorts of dresses and coiffures filled her eyes; all sorts of—no, there was not such variety in the young men. They did not surprise her, for they seemed to be men such as she might have known all her life. The uniformity of costume, also, made many of them indistinguishable. Everywhere there was an atmosphere of excitement such as she herself was feeling. She was dazzled and delighted. A new ichor seemed to run in her veins. It was some weeks since she had danced, and this place was so much more attractive than the suburban halls and rooms she had known that the surroundings appeared to Patricia ideal. For a moment she was almost timid in the face of such terrific energy, such fizz and glitter; but as soon as the band began to blare out a favourite fox-trot Patricia lost all timidity. New elasticity ran through her body: she was thrilling to the finger-tips. She was aware of Harry's hands—one clasping her own, the other lightly and firmly at her waist; of the ease of his step, the certainty of his command; and she yielded herself completely to the dance.

"It's all right," Harry murmured in Patricia's ear. "Perfect. Knew it would be."

He was able at last to hold Patricia within his arm, to be conscious of her dangerously charming proximity, to speak close to her radiant eyes, to employ the tone and glance which could no longer mar or frighten away the prospect of this manœuvred evening. He was in a familiar land, dealing with familiar emotions and opportunities, supremely content.

Patricia's face lighted up with a mischievous and unsuspecting smile. She could not read his more sophisticated satisfaction, but she was wholly spirited in her own.

"You're not such a bad dancer," she impudently informed him. "Considering."

vi

A slightly increased pressure of the hand was Harry's only response. He had rapidly fallen into that mood of enjoyment which gave his nature its fullest play. His energy was being employed; he was being charmed and gratified; his senses were all being titillated. Half a hundred women would have given him most of his present pleasure, but the novelty no less than the beauty of Patricia supplied just that added spice which any indulged appetite presently demands in its exercise.

They danced three times, and then sat down, watching the other dancers and comparing their styles. Here they could see a pair pedantically apart, correctness itself; there a couple buried in each other, the young man's face lost to view in his partner's hair. Every degree of absorption in the dance or in physical sensation was to be observed. The one thing absent from all faces was love; but since Harry and Patricia were not looking for this rare emotion in others they did not observe its absence.

Patricia was the first to catch sight of Monty, for whose figure she had been searching in the crowd. As she could have foretold, he was dancing perfectly. Blanche was rather stiff, she was pleased to notice. Monty's expression was that of one who was bored: a line of white showed beneath the iris of his eyes. His manner was almost too easy, as though his thoughts were engaged otherwise than with his partner or the dance. Nevertheless, he was obviously at home. His clothes fitted and suited him. He was far beyond most of his neighbours in appearance; for in too many of these Patricia cruelly discerned mediocrity. She shook her head at the spectacle of so much that was to her fresh eye uninspired and uninspiring.

"You see Monty?" she said to Harry.

He was about to answer when a swarm of people seemed to rise up about them. All greeted Harry. It was a large party, newly arrived, all the members of which appeared to be his friends. Young men, some of them fair, with toothbrush moustaches and curly hair, some of them dark and clean-shaven and very like Jack Penton in appearance; young women of all colours and all varieties of noisiness, clamoured for his attention. All the young men were combed and brushed to resemble tailors' dummies; all the young women were freshly powdered and freshly adorned with rouge and belladonna and those aids to lashes and brows and hair which heighten the attractiveness of women already attractive. Patricia listened laughingly while each was introduced to her; but she heard none of their names, and only knew that she was in the midst of a lively party. She could not analyse them, although she tried to do so in a hurry; and so she accepted them simply as Harry's perhaps ever so slightly peculiar friends. Only when it became clear that they proposed to settle in this place and

spoil her evening with Harry did Patricia take alarm. She was moving very quietly, preparing for the first notes of the next dance, when she saw the liveliest of the girls—a brunette who was beautiful enough to be dangerous, and obviously adept at this practice—seize Harry, pull him in step towards the dancing space, and thus forcibly kidnap him.

"Well!" ejaculated Patricia, wholly to herself. Harry cast a laughing, appealing glance at her. He was captured, and by a ruthless and rather boisterous victor. Patricia followed the two indignantly with her eyes. Swift anger gripped her. She had never been so angry as at this trifling folly. It was a direct challenge to her. It was a thing she could not have done herself—this impudent appropriation of a man who was confessedly present as the escort of another girl. She disliked the interloper. She was instantly suspicious of her. Although impulsive herself, Patricia had no interest in the impulsiveness of others, especially if the others were girls. Her anger blazed silently for a full minute. Slowly it diminished. She found herself almost deserted by the party of intruders, all of whom, with great freedom of gesture, were now dancing. Only one rueful young man remained; a young man with unoccupied blue eyes and flaxen hair, who looked painfully surprised at everything, and was in appearance so almost excessively juvenile as to make Patricia suppose him fresh from school.

"Er . . ." said the young man, with great feebleness of intellect.

"Yes!" cried Patricia. "I never saw anything like it. It's shameful. It's cradle-snatching. Was she *your* partner? Never mind; come along!" She swept him into the arena, as indomitably unmoved in appearance as she could have desired. Though her heart was

burning, Patricia's pride was beyond reproach. Nevertheless, she was desperately wounded.

vii

She was still aching from the injury to her pride when the dance came to an end. By that time the anonymous young man with the sheep-like blue eyes had exchanged an expression of helpless vacancy for one of helpless admiration. Once, during the dance, he had stammered: "I . . . I say, . . . you *do* . . . d-dance well"; but Patricia had ignored his speech. She could not compliment him in return. Her one curiosity was to know the name of the girl who had stolen Harry from her. Several times during the dance they had encountered the other pair; and Patricia had not failed to observe the voluptuous abandonment of the girl to a posture more nearly approaching immodesty than anything to be seen elsewhere.

"What was that girl's name?" she asked, as the young man proudly led her back.

"Bella?" he queried. "That's . . . that's Bella Verreker. That's not her name really: it's her stage name."

Stage! Generations of puritanism caused a shiver to run through Patricia. She was instantly apprehensive. Bella was dangerous to Harry, to the evening, to . . . her own happiness. Stricken with horror as she was, Patricia's distress was poignant. She was really afraid. This was something beyond her depth and her understanding. Her mood of fear was thereafter succeeded by one in which this curbing of spontaneous enjoyment was resented by her vanity. She was elaborately indifferent.

At that moment they met Monty, who had come to-

wards her through the pressing crowd, with a politeness oriental in its quality, in its subtly encroaching familiarity towards herself.

"Hullo!" cried Patricia, in joyous greeting. She was all unconscious of anything but her own feelings. At this juncture the appearance of Monty was welcome, not for her interest in him, but for his opportuneness as a diversion. "I caught sight of you before."

"Come and dance," demanded Monty.

"Where's . . . Mrs. Tallentyre?"

"Resting, and talking to a friend."

Patricia's teeth were firmly together. That impetuous mouth had become hard. Monty could read her as though she had spoken aloud. He knew she had been hurt, that she was in reaction. He knew that he had presented himself to Patricia as an opportunity. She was tempted; she was falling. He smiled comfortably.

"No you don't, Monty!" came Harry's voice: "No bagging my partner!"

There was a singular little scene; the three of them standing together, all ruffled and all good-humouredly smiling. Monty was not as tall as Harry, who accordingly towered over both of the others. He was very much the well-groomed man of the world in this place, and yet his smile was faintly ugly. It had changed within an instant, had deepened and become set. Not a wrinkle showed upon his unreadable face. Harry's cheerful grin, which displayed all his big white teeth, held combativeness. Patricia, thoroughly exasperated at the general bad manners, and not least at her own impulse to naughtiness, resented the feeling that she was a mere partner to be claimed by either. She was both exasperated and wisely alarmed.

"I saw you dancing with Bella," suavely explained Monty.

"She's with a party here . . ." Harry was grim. There was definite conflict between the two men, spoiling, but controlled, so that while all three of them knew the conflict to be there no others near by could have guessed its presence. "But Patricia's with me."

Something—she did not realise what it was—cleared Patricia's vision. It was necessary that she should act with decision. She turned to Harry, no longer ill-tempered, but paler and almost deliberately patient in her manner to him.

"I'll dance once with Monty," she said. "And then come back to you."

And as the music began, she fell into step with Monty, leaving Harry chagrined and reddening. There was still a little temper in her emotion; but her chief thought as she danced was: "Two great babies!"

Patricia might have considered herself a third; but she did not do this.

viii

During the rest of the evening the relation between Harry and Patricia, although it was gay and friendly, never quite recovered the fluency it had attained during dinner. They danced together; but Patricia, warned by what she had seen, shunned anything more cordial than the merest partnership in the dance. Harry tried to hold her more closely, but he found that it was at the cost of enjoyable dancing, and he therefore abandoned the attempt. He discovered that Patricia, while she was as agreeable as ever, had no intention of letting him make love to her. It was contrary to his practice to explain or to apologise, and he did not refer to Bella. Patricia, upon her side, showed no disposition to forsake or despise the interloping party; and so gradually the two of them drifted apart. She danced with two or

three of the other men, and he with Bella and another girl. The noise of the room, and the crowd of people, seemed to increase. It became late. The party showed signs of an inclination for the evening's end. Drinks had long been done with; new arrivals, fresher and more eager than those who had been dancing for some time, took the floor. The evening was collapsing. Quite definitely it was petering out. At a quarter-to-twelve there was a signal for closing the place; and then, as part of a general shoal of departing merry-makers, a very sleepy party pressed out into the night air. Monty and Blanche had left long before.

As they thus emerged, Patricia, in evading Harry's attempt at segregation, found herself with two of the other girls, who both said they lived at Chelsea. The journey homeward was therefore made in a crowd, which separated Harry and Patricia. They all came to the end of the street in which Patricia lived, and then to the house itself; so that she was not for an instant alone with Harry. Even at the parting, he was but the last of the group to bid farewell, and she walked slowly upstairs to her rooms with cheery voices still ringing in her ears.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SECOND EVENING

i

FROM that evening Patricia had no lack of companionship. She had fallen into a whole group of new friends and new Christian names. There was no end to the Dorises, the Bills, the Owens, the Hildas, and the Normans whom she met at every dance and every party. She sat on floors and talked with assurance; she danced with a score of men. During the daytime she did more dress-making than bread-work. In the evenings, carried away by the sense of new experience and new power, she added a veneer of alluring sophistication to her nature. Never had the face of life been so quickly altered.

At first it seemed to Patricia that these young men and women whom she now so constantly met belonged to a different species from herself. She had been brought up in a suburban atmosphere in which anything not perfectly respectable was done in secret. It had been a disagreeable atmosphere to her, because she was both impetuous and innocent, a combination of characteristics which always raises trouble for the owner. Regarding herself as a free spirit, she had received rebuffs from those more strict; and her candour had given rise to wrong impressions about herself in her own mind as well as in the minds of others. She had supposed that Patricia alone was in a state of rebellion against suburban laws. She had even exaggerated her own importance as a rebel. Now she found that these laws did not apply; and that in fact defiance of them was unnec-

essary. The young people of her fresh pleasure did not defy: they had forgotten. She became aware of a whole new code. A free spirit she still felt herself; but one in a world of free spirits. Along with the exaggerated sense of her own personality common to clever girls of our day she had also the good sense to realise the improvement in her own circumstances. Patricia rejoiced. She delighted in the feeling of wide acquaintance, of new liberty. It pleased her to meet cordial young people who were no cleverer and no more concerned with strait-laced morals than herself and whom she did not despise. She began at last to feel at home. They were young, free-and-easy, less mentally ingenious than she was, admiring, unaffected. It was as though she belonged to the same family as themselves, but was of a naturally brighter plumage. Her vanity was sensibly fortified.

And through all this new experimenting with her own strength there ran for Patricia something more precious still. The added significance which had been given to her days was due only in small part to this increased circle. The friends she made were a background; they filled in the picture; but no more. Every day was coloured and moulded for Patricia by happiness, the happiness of young half-love. It warmed her heart through the gloomy winter days; made her laugh, sparkle, sigh, with a new tenderness; and gave fresh life to all her perceptions and understandings. Occasionally she even glimpsed her own happiness, when the excitement of it was past and she sat more thoughtfully alone. And then the precariousness of it, the sense of insecurity, of withheld culmination, gave to the vision a fresh colour and zest of danger.

That one evening with Harry, which had begun so splendidly and ended in such dissonance, was but the

beginning. The mixed crowd of people had resolved itself into two separate portions—the theatrical and the non-theatrical; and even the theatrical portion proved shortly to be a welcoming band. Bella Verreker was appearing in musical comedy, and she did not again encroach. Only the less aggressive girls continued to join the parties; and Patricia found that several of these, and some of the young men, were so far without regular paying engagements. They appeared in private or semi-private shows, for experience and reputation; and she had the first consciousness of forming a part of her generation. All were lively people to know slightly, and the non-theatricals, some of whom were Civil Servants and others of moderately independent means or of various artistic or semi-artistic occupations, were immense talkers and eager, but not expert, dancers. Beside them all, Harry was as distinguished in his way as was Patricia in hers. They were both welcomed, even sought.

Patricia felt herself alive at last. Letters came for her in the mornings and at night. Harry called for her. She herself gave a little party in her small rooms at the top of the house. It was fun to have seven or eight guests sitting with difficulty in the crowded space, and talking to their hearts' content. But more than that she enjoyed going to yet larger parties in more capacious studios, where the floor was sometimes cleared for impromptu dancing, where there was dressing-up, and where the games made them all laugh and talk nonsense together. She loved to swing into one of the brasseries of West End restaurants, to meet other talkative youngsters, to smoke cigarettes and sip little strange drinks. It made her feel very bold and modern and authoritative. And most of all did she enjoy the evenings which she and Harry spent together, dining at Paggolino's or some

smaller Italian restaurant, and going together to a theatre or to Topping's or the Queensford or even to more popular halls where the bands were good and the floors better.

"If only," breathed Patricia. "If only one could never grow up! Always, always this beautiful . . ."

ii

And then sometimes she longed to grow up. As the variety began to stir her blood, and an odd unoccupied evening became a restless horror, she knew that one day she would want to be different—to do different things. She tried to tell Harry how she felt. They were sitting at dinner together one evening, when she had telephoned to him in fear of a solitary time, and they had gone to the Chat Blanc. Patricia was smoking one of her own cigarettes over coffee, and was blowing the smoke slowly from between pursed lips. She was fully conscious of the extraordinary intimacy between them, and at the same time of the constraint that underlay the intimacy and gave it an attractive excitement. Harry was so very much her friend, and yet her feeling for him was so entirely different from that which she had for the other young men of her acquaintance. He was cleverer than they—with his constant sparkle of lively expression,—and more handsome. He was himself, where the others were almost indistinguishable both in themselves in their rather immature and shallow and admirably friendly attitude to herself. His admiration was that of a man. She responded to it.

Around Patricia rose the white walls of the restaurant, daubed with the strange sick fancies of eccentric artists; and from their table she could command the whole of the long narrow room filled with other, similar

tables, all with orange and white check tablecloths and black cruet stands and pewter knives and forks and spoons. Patricia could see other guests departing at the approach of theatre times, and waiters bowing and flicking the tables clear of crumbs, and folding fresh napkins and standing the menus upright again. In a few moments they would be the only people left in the restaurant, except for one suburban couple who had strayed into Soho under the impression that theirs was a very bold experiment in night life, and who were waiting for the sensations to begin. It was just then that Patricia had this notion, which was new, and therefore irrepressibly vehement, about the desirability of growing up.

Harry sat opposite, a little leaning back from the table, dabbing a finished cigarette into the plate which they were using as an ash-tray. He was in brown tweeds, which made his beautiful fairness appear to dominate and penetrate even his clothes. The fresh brown of his face, the strength of his shoulders, the gold at his temples and in his neat moustache, the cleanliness of his lips and chin, and the general magnetism of his air of disciplined vigour, were all apparent. But in addition she was most singularly moved by the fine moulding of his cheeks and that air of confident good-humour with which the popular man is so peculiarly endowed. His smile, so ready, so consciously agreeable and charming, was a part of Harry himself. Patricia, equally fair, with her piquant little head, and the blue expressive eyes and mobile lips, was his delicious counterpart. She was her age, and a child, and a witch, with much greater unconsciousness than he, because with Patricia, whose thoughts were quick and fleeting, every thought had a reflection in her face. And at this moment, from happiness, she had turned to a sudden grave discovery, far more quickly than most men could have

done; and her gravity had given way before resolution, desire, uncertainty, and again conviction.

"I'd like to have a big house," she said. "A country house, with lots of servants, and a lake, and peacocks, and a ballroom, and a wood, and lawns. I'd like to manage an estate."

"Good God!" cried Harry, pretending to be startled, and sharply dropping his cigarette stump into the plate. "What for?"

"I'd like it. You see, all this running about—it's great fun, and I love it. But it won't *last*."

"Why not?" Harry's tone was a little flat, as though his surprise had only been exaggerated, as though he had been disturbed by a definite assumption. "I don't see why it shouldn't. After all . . ."

"I shall get tired of it."

Harry laughed, showing his big white teeth. Patricia wondered if he knew that when he laughed she had a sudden almost aching thrill of affection for something boyish and lovable in him. Did he know?

"You won't," he assured her, the laugh remaining and fixing in his cheeks for a moment deep lines of untroubled good humour. "Not for a century."

"I might. I might get tired of it in a month," she said. "Sometimes I'm tired of it already." Patricia hardly knew what she was saying. The words came easily; but the conviction was lagging behind somewhere in another thought. "You see, Tom Perry and Daphne and Woods—they're all right, but they've got no brains. If I want to talk to anybody—really talk, I mean,—there's nobody but you."

"Well?" His grin reappeared. "Aren't I enough?"

"You're splendid, of course."

"You're not so sure?" Harry's question was teasing: he was not taking her seriously, was being indul-

gent, deliberately winning: but a shock ran through Patricia even as she responded to his charm. The hesitation which he had detected—had it really been there? Quick emotion moved her. She turned away her head for an instant. For that fraction of time her doubt had become a reality. She was pitifully uncertain of herself. Surely if one were—say, even half-in-love—one never had such a doubt of the beloved? And yet Harry—he was older than herself, a man, fixed perhaps in his present state of life. . . . If she grew out of him! What then? In such a life as they led. . . . Patricia still clung to the theory of constancy, of common growth, of happiness for ever after. With all her arrogance, she did not want to lead. To be led was a necessity to her.

"Don't you see I'm not sure?" she asked. "How can you be sure? How can you ever know what you'll think in a week, or a month, or a year?"

"Of course you can't," Harry agreed jocularly. "The best way is not to think of it—not to look forward at all." His words were light, his face untroubled. Did he not understand? Was he reassuring her, or did his words truly represent the limitations of his insight?

"But I've *got* to!" She was urgent. Tears were in her eyes. "I was just thinking . . ."

"I'm not going to get tired of it," Harry said, his jaw set and his laughter gone.

"Aren't you?" asked Patricia, her heart sinking. Her doubt of an instant before seemed to be confirmed. A heavy sigh escaped her. For a moment she was silent. Then, with an abrupt rally, she shook her head. "No," she continued. "You're not going to get tired of it. Nor am I!"

iii

But as soon as she had spoken the words, she knew they were not true. She could not tell whether she would tire now or later; but she was sure that one day she would tire. Her capacity for growth already flew a warning, and she could not for ever be blind to the signal. Well, and what then? A shadow darkened her eyes. She looked across at Harry's clear and happy face, at his crisp hair, and felt the strength and energy that was in him. How resist that boyish charm, the laughter that seemed so constant? Could one ever tire of laughter? Surely it was impossible. Her heart softened. The little impetuous mouth drooped ever so little. At sight of that, Harry's smile broadened.

"You've got a quaint mind," he said. "It doesn't matter in the least."

"It does." Patricia frowned. Then as suddenly she smiled in return. "No, it doesn't. You're quite right. And yet it does, you know."

"Well, which?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I'll never know."

"As for these young cubs and cublets, let 'em rip. *They'll* never be any different. Where you're wrong is in worrying about it. If you think, you wobble. Therefore, don't think."

"It's easy to say." Patricia regarded herself for a moment with solemnity. She had a clear sense of herself refusing to be content with something less than the best. She wanted to live to the fullest capacity. She was quite intensely in earnest about that, about her responsibility to Patricia Quin. It was a sacred trust.

He stretched a big hand across the table and caught her wrist, pressing it. Their exchanged glance was of joy, almost, it seemed, of understanding.

"Cheer up!" Harry urged. "Let's clear out of this."

Within two minutes they were out in the black street. A stormy wind rushed along towards and past them, leaving Patricia shivering a little. Harry put out an arm and caught her suddenly to him. She was immediately free again, but she was breathless with something other than loss of breath, and her heart was beating.

"We'll go and dance somewhere," he suggested.

Patricia shrank from his tenderness at this moment. The wind, the hint of rain, her hidden conflict of perplexity, all discomposed her. She wanted to be alone, to think. And yet, on the contrary, most passionately to be with him, and not to think—never to think, never to wake. . . . At last:

"No," said she. "I'm not in the mood. I'd spoil it. I'll go home. Let's go by Tube."

They came out into Shaftesbury Avenue, which was half deserted now that the omnibuses and the theatres had engulfed so many of those who crowd the street; and then that deluge which had been on the tail of the wind was suddenly released, and poured down so sharply that the two of them had to run to the Piccadilly Circus station. Warmed and laughing, they stood close together in the crowded lift, and plunged down into the earth. Echoing passages, vehement advertisements of concerts and theatres, some stairs in a blaze of baffling light; and they were listening to the distant rumblings of Underground trains.

"On Saturday," resumed Harry, "we'll go to the Ireland match at Twickenham. It's always the best Rugger of the season. If you'd like to? And in the evening Puffer's got a party in his cellars. Sweaty but jolly, the cry is, I believe."

"No, I'm going to Monty Rosenberg's."

"The devil! Monty?" He pulled up quickly. His

head was shaken. "No, don't go there. Puffer's a decent old sort."

"So's Monty." Patricia was suddenly defiant, as at some assumption of right. Harry grimaced at her.

"First I've heard of it," he said. "Don't go there, there's a dear!"

"I've promised. I'm going with Jacky Dean."

"Good Lord!" Harry was amazed. He would have protested further; but their train at this moment burst from the tunnel. They were crushed into it by eager fellow passengers, and sat blinking in that strained artificial light which is so much more trying to the eyes than the light of the sun. Extraordinary roaring filled their ears. With the crowd and the dazzle and the subterranean re-echoings of violent noise they were dazed and helpless. Impossible to converse. Impossible to think clearly. When they wished to communicate with one another it was only by means of raised voices at each other's ears. At last Harry could stand it no longer. At a shout, he proceeded: "Jack's . . . a decent little . . . owl. But he's an *awful* . . . fool!" Patricia nodded. The train ran into a station, and there was an instant's silence. In it, Harry resumed: "Why not come with me? Don't you want to come?" No answer. He bent nearer, and Patricia could not look up. "You'd rather go to Monty's? Well, look here, come to the match, any way. I've got to go there—on business. I'm doing a special on it. Will you? That all right? Good."

The train started again. They were lost in that fearsome jungle of uproar. Patricia was struggling with herself. The noise seemed to have destroyed all her wit, all her confidence. She could not understand the sensation she had—as though she were stifling, as though the blood were filling her cheeks.

"I'd rather come to Puffer's," she managed to shout.

"Well?"

"I can't."

Harry turned away grimly, staring at an advertisement. Their wills were in conflict. Patricia's eyes closed. Her brain was full of tormenting thoughts. He was cruel. Then, no . . . it was she who had been. . . . Uncontrollably, her hand swiftly moved, and was tucked lightly between his arm and his body. Harry's hand came as swiftly to press hers, and although the two hands drew apart again Patricia's remained within the crook of his elbow for the rest of the short journey.

iv

By the time they reached South Kensington station the rain had ceased. Big clouds were passing overhead at high speed, and the wind remained fierce. Somehow it appeared to Patricia that when one had looked upwards and seen the clouds, and behind them that lighter darkness the sky, all that stood upon the surface of the earth was dwarfed. The people, the lamps, the trees, the houses, were all shrunk to insignificance, as the pain and bewilderment of poor humans must seem to those steady eyes of pity, the stars. She could not see any stars, but the gusts of wind made for the impression of great spaces, and presently the few trees by the side of the road, and the dark houses which lay beyond, took on the air of a mysterious wood. She felt that she and Harry were wandering alone in a wood at night, beneath the stars, listening to the endless torment of the anguished leaves; and all her love of beauty made her heart soft, so that she was moved beyond tears, and wished only to rest her head and prolong the ecstatic moment.

But she could not speak to Harry. She could have taken his hand and walked onward in silence; but that was impossible, because this vision that she had was unsubstantial, and Harry, whose laughter was so delightful, would not understand anything that was so intangible, so unrelated to his normal life. She was conscious in him of a thick stream of emotion, of the power of serious preoccupation with sensual things, amounting to obsession; and sometimes she had that same thickness of emotion when she was with him or longing for him, but never with obsession;—always with a shyness, a flying away, as of some will o' the wisp. But she more often had only a light playing of fancy, which made love a beautiful game; and now she had only a childish desire for happiness and mystical beauty. This her instinct told her was not shared. If Harry laughed, it was because there were whole realms of which he knew nothing. She had a swift certainty; there was no poetry in his nature. He was all the time absorbed in the tangible. Oh! What treason! She would not allow such thoughts. They were wicked, unjust, treacherous. . . . How the wind thrust and blustered among the trees! She could feel it upon her face and in her hair, and in her eyes. Harry said:

"Your friend Amy Roberts has been making a fool of herself."

Patricia, withdrawn from her wonderings by so incongruous a speech, could hardly understand him for a moment. Amy . . . Amy. . . . It was an instant before she could bring herself to recognition.

"Oh." At last, vaguely, Patricia groped for his meaning. "What's she been doing?"

"It seems she ran into Felix Brow somewhere, and taxed him with saying she couldn't paint. Of course, poor Felix muffed the thing. Or perhaps, after all, he

didn't. He said he didn't know she painted at all. Yes, I expect that wasn't so much of a muff as I thought it was at first. Damned insulting," Harry laughed appreciatively, thinking the speech over to himself before he continued: "He begged her not to betray him. That made Amy angry. Somebody had told her he'd said she painted with a besom. She'd prefer even that to being ignored. After all, she's no good as an artist. She's too stupid. And she *makes* these ridiculous scenes. There's some itch in her that makes her precipitate a row."

"I think she's conceited."

"Of course she is. Did you ever know a fool who wasn't? But she's worse, because she quarrels with people who mean kindly by her."

"I know." Rather despairingly, Patricia shook her head. "Did Felix really say that?"

"My dear! Poor old Felix wouldn't say anything so dull. After all, he *is* a wit. He'd say something worth saying, and worth repeating, or he wouldn't open his mouth."

"These witty things, though. Are they really said?"

Patricia's cynicism was too much for Harry. He laughed, looking down at her with an almost proprietary air of delight.

"I've heard a few of them. They're not always spontaneous, of course. But it's so absurd of Amy to quarrel with a man like Felix. It can only do her harm. He *will* say something about her now. I mean, he's a man to stand in with, not quarrel with."

Patricia was struck by this point.

"Do you really think that?" she asked. "That one ought to 'stand in' with people."

"Of course!" Harry's tone was severe.

"You think it's right? You do it yourself?" Pat-

ricia's tone was sad. She could not see his face; but then neither could he see hers. For Patricia the question was of vital importance. Yet Harry was not conscious of the meaning of her question.

"You've got to do *everything* in this world," he assured her confidently.

"How base!" Patricia's protest was so low that it escaped Harry. "But surely, Harry, if you're any good . . ."

"All the more reason. Of course, it doesn't matter in Amy's case . . ."

"I must go and see her."

Patricia spoke mechanically. She was not thinking of Amy. She was thinking of Harry, and of herself.

"She'll probably tell you about Felix—with embellishments of her own. A few of the withering replies she's thought of since. I will say that for Amy: she improves her speeches a lot in revision." He laughed with some dryness.

"Harry!" protested Patricia. "I believe you're spiteful!"

"As a nun!" he agreed. "Didn't you know?"

Again Patricia shrank into herself. They were nearing her home now, and the road was very dark, and Harry's nearness gave her a sense of happiness and security. And yet she was neither happy nor secure. It seemed as though the stormy evening had reawakened all her sensitiveness. No, she was not happy. Intermingled with her own mood was the strange jumble of problems which had been raised by their talk and the memories it evoked. Now she wanted to leave him, now to stay—and at each turn she was exasperated anew at her own waywardness. The shallowness of Harry's conviction that one ought to cultivate those who might be useful hurt her (as similar remarks had done several

times before). She remembered several of her distastes for things he had said. She remembered, too, their talk over dinner on the subject of growing up; and it made her shiver. And yet she continued to walk by Harry's side, feeling in his proximity the same joy, the same warm affection as she had done all the evening. It surprised her to know that one's love for a person could fluctuate so, and so persist; that it could come and go almost as if with breathing. She was undecided. Did she perhaps not love him at all? It was as though some reality greater than inclination, or else some very strong illusion, was always interrupting her love and making it ineffective. He was the only man she had ever wanted to kiss her, the only man to whom she could physically have yielded herself; and yet . . .

She fell into a series of fresh ponderings, about Amy and Jack Penton, about Harry and Amy, about Harry and Rhoda, Harry and Bella, about Harry's spitefulness; and with each variation of the theme it became less and less possible to disclose the nature of her thoughts to Harry. How could one love a person, and yet sometimes dislike what they said, and resent what they did, and hate what they thought? And yet, as her heart told her, he was the man she loved, so beautiful, so strong, so much her true love. What were thoughts and speeches compared with that instinctive certainty? She was torn. It was a puzzle to Patricia that this hesitation should arise. She was unhappy under her happiness.

Suddenly she became aware that they were outside her home, and that the house was dark, and that Harry had spoken to her without receiving a reply.

"Hey!" he cried sharply, to attract her attention.

Patricia, startled, looked up at him as if she were dreaming. The little hushing wind in the slim and bare

branches of small trees was accompanied by the pattering drops of a fresh shower. Cold splashes touched her cheeks. She could see Harry standing like a giant above her, could feel the radiance of his strength and beauty and love for her. She was deeply moved. Harry, amused and laughing at her abstracted silence, put his arm round her. As if naturally, but in reality because she was only half-attentive, Patricia stopped, standing there within his arm. She was quite happy, quite at ease, but dreaming.

"What is it?" she asked, in a very hushed way, hardly to be heard.

"Only that you're a darling!" Harry stooped and kissed her, holding her tightly but gently within his arm, and with his free hand raising her hand to his lips. She felt his rough cheek against her own, his warm lips, and against her hair the brim of his hat. How strange that for a moment, held so firmly, Patricia felt nothing at all except that it was delicious to be there, delicious to be so encircled, so loved. Harry kissed her a second time, but not her averted mouth. She felt his lips encroaching, his hold more urgent. Patricia's heart beat faster. So she might yield herself to love. He would kiss her lips, and she would kiss him, and then for ever—for ever . . . She was half-yielding. She was yielding. Faster and faster ran her heart, and the wind and rain and darkness were blotted out in this sweet stupor. And then some electrical revolt shocked her into resistance.

"No!" she said, very quietly, and sought to disengage herself.

"Kiss me!" demanded Harry. "My dearest!"

"No!" said Patricia, again. But she was not really unwilling or afraid. She was happy and at ease and full of almost luxurious reassurance. And at the same time she was inexorable. When Harry would have kept her

and again would have kissed her he was unable to do so. Her body seemed to be steel, her will greater than his impetuosity. In the struggle between domination and the instinct for liberty this new strength of Patricia's was in no way to be gainsaid. She continued, despite his effort, unquestionably to belong to herself. The impulse to submit was vanquished by something yet more insistent.

"Patricia!" commanded Harry. He was warm, was masterful. Such a tone had never hitherto failed him, and was now both ardent and sincere. Patricia was quite aware of the physical agitation which he thus expressed. He was bent upon victory, forcing the issue. And with each fleeting second his will strengthened her own. Harry was urgent. Patricia's nerve was steadied. He followed her, determined, very nearly irresistible.

"No. I'm not sure that I want you to." Her tone was cold and without feeling; but her eyes were shining and her heart was full.

"My dear, you can't . . ."

She held his hand, and pressed it, all the time evading his renewed embrace. The wind came sweeping along the street, and around them was blackness and silence. Moved and troubled, but as one in a dream, Patricia freed herself, made no answer to his entreaty, and left him listening to the sound of a closing door, and feeling the smart tingle of raindrops upon his face and the backs of his bare hands.

CHAPTER EIGHT: A DAY IN PATRICIA'S LIFE

i

PATRICIA undressed, still trembling, still with a set face and a false air of coolness. Only when she was in bed was she hysterically filled with anger for herself, and contempt, almost with self-horror. She could not comprehend herself or her own stupidity, so great was her longing for love and understanding.

"Love—yes; but understanding!" He could understand her in happiness—now, at dinner, at the dance. But as she grew older, as she needed guidance and wisdom? Never! That was her thought of Harry, the first wild sweep of anger at *his* deficiency. "He'd never understand me—never!" And then again she demanded of the silence, striking the pillow with her vehemence: "Why—why—why?" Why had she so shrunk from love? Excuses poured into her mind, the more vehement because she felt them to be invalid. It had been a mood, this rejection of his love. She wasn't accountable for her moods. She said definite things without knowing them to be definite—without meaning them to be definite. It wasn't final. It *wasn't*. Then self-anger again grew uppermost. "You fool! You little fool!" she cried aloud. Then again: "I'm not *ready*. I don't know what love is. I only want to *be* loved. I don't *want* to love and be loved—not finally, like this; not give myself up to it. Only like a little girl. I don't love him. I felt it. I've just been playing . . . I *can't* love him! If I did, I should be sure. I shouldn't think . . . of all this . . . of his not . . . of my grow-

ing out of him. . . . I should be proud—overwhelmed. I'm not proud. Not overwhelmed. He's only selfish. I could tell. Anybody could have told. The *feeling* was all wrong. It was . . . He's kissed other girls. *They* were proud—willing. . . . He wants *love* in *his* way—not mine. He can't have it. I'm not *sure*. I've got to be sure. It's for life. He must *give me* time. I felt he wouldn't. . . . And yet I do love him so. . . . Harry! My dear!" She pressed her lips to her own fingers, kissing them sweetly. "I wanted him to kiss me. I liked it. I wanted it. I wouldn't let him. . . . How could I be so beastly—so *beastly*! I couldn't have kissed him. I've thought of it—liked the idea of it. It's the reality—cowardice. Oh, I'm afraid of life. It's all very well to play and dream—lovesick girl. When a man really . . . It wouldn't have been right. It wouldn't have been true. It *can't* be right to feel like this! I'm sophisticated. I want love, and not love,—love and friendship and wisdom and *understanding*—somebody to understand me; somebody delicate and wise . . . beautiful. . . . I want too much. You can't ask . . ."

With a mind distraught, she turned upon the pillow, until it grew hot and seemed to rasp her cheeks; and her head ached and her eyes and lips burned and the room seemed overpoweringly full of stale air. She could see the darkness out of doors, and hear the wind tearing and pressing in wild gusts out of doors, and soot whispering down the chimney, like mice foraging in a newspaper. The wooden rod at the foot of the hanging linen blind knocked against the casement until she was frenzied; and she rose passionately to draw the blind to its full height, out of the draught. Standing there in the darkness she could feel the cold air upon her raised arm and her breast, and in a moment through her ~~thin~~ nightgown.

And all the time her lips were drawn back and down in this great distress and self-blame which had come suddenly into her blithe days. And she realised that it had all been implicit in her blitheness, that only a young girl could have supposed that the postponement could go on for as long as her delight in it was maintained.

"If only I had something to *drink* I should feel better!" cried Patricia, on an impulse. She went to the washstand, and the carafe was empty. The water-jug was empty. Lucy had forgotten to fill it. Even here the catastrophe was a futility, a humiliation, a further exasperation. She was maddened. She was shaken and jangled. Rage swept her. "Oh, damn!" she cried. "Everything! It's *awful*!"

With her hands in her mouth, Patricia turned back towards the bed, and leant against the foot of it; and sobs shook her body, so bitterly that she was afraid her crying would be overheard, and crept back to bed to cover herself and stifle the noise. It was the great strong dreadful crying of a little girl who had been disappointed of some dearest wish. It was not a woman's crying at all. It was the result of shock and self-contempt; but it was not the heartbreaking sorrow of the hopeless woman. Patricia would yet laugh again—would laugh, perhaps even at herself. But now she could see only her own cowardice, and she was in despair.

Presently the crying ceased, and Patricia began to talk to herself, very softly, as a little girl who has been desperately unhappy will sometimes do; and because there was nobody in the world to comfort her she began to try and comfort herself, speaking between small spasmodic sobs, and explaining and cheering, as the mother she could not remember might have done. It was poor

cheer; but it gradually began to soothe her. And at last, lingeringly, in pity for herself at having nobody to console her for ignorance and uncertainty, Patricia began refreshingly to cry. Long afterwards, while it was still dark, she fell asleep.

ii

When Lucy banged into the room in the morning Patricia still slept, her little pale face deep in the pillow, and her hair tumbled; and she would have continued to sleep if Lucy, in stumping across to the window, had not been reminded of her failure to fill the carafe and water-jug.

"Gawd love a duck!" exclaimed Lucy, at which Patricia awoke.

She could vaguely see a pink dress, very soiled, and a big dirty apron surrounding a stumpy body, and a little cap, and the dirty red smudge which she knew to be Lucy's face.

"Good morning," said Patricia drowsily, still hardly conscious of the day.

"I've said it once," cried Lucy, emphasising the sibilants until she appeared to hiss. "I said it as I come in. And now I've got to traipse all the way downstairs again to get you some cole water! What a life!"

"Well, Lucy," said Patricia, putting her head out of bed. "I don't think you can blame me for that. In fact I was very annoyed last night, when I was thirsty, to find there wasn't any. I might have parched to death."

"You didden brush your teeth larce night, I can see," retorted Lucy. "Got 'ome too late, I s'pose, and frightened of the beetles." She clucked her tongue in reproof.

"Your young man wouldn't like to know *that* about you!"

"Don't be coarse, Lucy. I *did* forget to brush my teeth. But it's the first time for months."

"Gawd. Some people wants a nursie always after them! I got no time for it. Not myself, I 'aven't. I s'pose I got to get your water now. Don't want to scald yourself. 'E wouldn't like that, neither!"

An idea shot into Patricia's head. She had a sudden cowardice about getting up. What if Harry had written? She felt she simply could not face all the possible sequels to last night's scene. It was terrifying! As she lay there she definitely feared the day, and its outcome. All the time Lucy was away, Patricia was trembling with apprehensiveness. She would run away—she would burn a letter—she would. . . . Ghastly possibilities flew through her mind. Lucy had hardly re-entered, panting and noisy, before the inquiry was launched alarmingly at her.

"Lucy, is there a letter for me?" demanded Patricia, in a betrayingly self-conscious and unsteady voice.

"No!" said the smudge, rather severely. "There ain't! But there's some nice cole kipper, if you 'urry."

She disappeared, while Patricia, half-relieved and half tearful, with a sinking heart, put her head back under the clothes, feeling ill and doleful and heavy with trepidation.

iii

There was a long silence. It was not that Patricia was asleep, although she was so tired. She was malingering. A fond mother would have been misled. She almost, in that rôle, convinced herself. But she knew that Lucy would never be a willing dupe, and something about Lucy's wholly unsentimental attitude towards ill-health alarmed Patricia. It was not, however, until she

was stung by a bitter thought that she rolled back the bedclothes and paddled her bare feet upon the floor.

"I'm just like Amy, with Jack Penton!" was the thought. "*How horrible!*"

That thought stayed with Patricia during the whole of her bathing and washing. She was appalled by it. No criticism could have been more withering.

"But Harry would never be like Jack!" she exclaimed, with certainty. "He'd never stay on the chance that I'd change my mind. With him it's one thing or the other. *I wonder . . .*"

It was a possibility. Perhaps it was the solution. Patricia felt brighter. Of course! Why had she not thought of it before? She would say to Harry, and it would be an extremely reasonable speech: "Harry, I do think I love you. But I want to make sure. Can we go on as we are—just being friends—for the present?" "Of course, old girl," Harry would say. "I don't want to hurry you, if you're not sure. Just try me for a little while." Patricia laughed, as she imagined him saying that. Harry would laugh, too. She would . . . Her eyes sparkled. She became demure.

Suddenly, in her imagining, Harry turned sharply to her. "By the way," he said. "How long am I to wait?" Patricia answered very quickly. "Well, I couldn't marry you until I got a trousseau, could I?"

She had awakened in a very different state of mind from that in which she had slept. Far from the danger, she had become quite bold. It seemed at this moment as though she had almost made up her mind.

"But I haven't . . . really," said Patricia. "I'm only brave in the morning, because the danger isn't urgent." It was true. She had floated back into her dream of love. The reality no longer disturbed her. Slowly her mind returned to the bitter thought which had driven

her out of bed. Supposing Harry said: "Now or never!" What then? Immediately her courage oozed away. She shook her head, and became very grave. Even in her drowsy state of unreality she still knew that she must play the game. "I can't give him up!" she thought. Then she laughed without glee. "I'm like Amy. I know it. Why am I like her? Are all girls like her? Impossible! I shall go and see Amy. It'll be good for me. I'll go this very afternoon!"

iv

Over breakfast, the nature and temperature of which was as Lucy had prophesied, and of which she could therefore eat little, Patricia had a cunning insight. Harry was not in the habit of accepting refusals. If he wanted a thing he went for it. Therefore, supposing his work did not prevent, he might call for her at any time during the day. He would come. . . . She was seized with panic. No message would send him away, and she was not in a state to see him.

"You silly!" cried Patricia.

All the same, she could not see Harry until she was more composed. It would be impossible. Consent won from her in such circumstances, she knew, would be disastrous. Instinct was sound there! She knew herself well enough to realise that coercion of her impulses would result—not in submission, as it might do in the case of girls less neurotic, but in inhibitions. Therefore she must not see Harry until she was calmer, until she could freely give him the love he demanded. To know this, and to foresee his possible arrival, was to take instant action. She looked out of the window. Last night's storm had been appropriately followed by morning calm. The few clouds in the sky immediately visible from her

room were white, and they were racing ferociously to the east. That meant more rain. She would go prepared; but she could not stay at home another minute without increasing her danger.

Quick! Her mackintosh, her waterproof cap! Her handbag, gloves. . . . In fresh panic, Patricia gathered these necessary things and hurried down the stairs.

"Lucy!" she called to the kitchen. "I'm going out. All day. If anybody comes, say you don't know *when* I'll be back."

"Righto, miss!" came a faint call in response.

The gusty wind slammed the front door behind her. A hasty glance along the street showed that the path was still clear. With lowered head and beating heart Patricia made her escape, laughing a little at her own fears. Some exultation showed itself also in her inner consciousness—a vanity, a something of the heart. After all, it was something to have a lover of whose determination one could be happily afraid! Panic had its core of delight!

v

An omnibus carried Patricia to Charing Cross, and she walked over to the National Gallery. It was not open yet. The beginning of her day was inauspicious. It became necessary that she should wander about the streets, looking in shops, unless she could think of some alternative to her first improvised plan. She glanced up at the sky, and the rapid movement of the clouds gave her inspiration. The sky was brilliantly blue, and a draughty day in London might well be delightful in the country. But where, cheaply, could she go? The nearest open space would be the best. It required but a moment's reflection to decide what to do. Another omnibus would take her to Hampstead. And so she was

once again in movement, and, looking over the side of the vehicle with a curled lip of distaste and a sharp wonder at the people who could bear to live in such districts, she passed through the dinginess of Camden Town and Gospel Oak. From the point of arrival, where the omnibuses rested awhile before they returned once again on their unsteady journey, she quickly reached the Heath.

It was very windy, and the ground beneath her feet was soggy with the rain; but Patricia trudged on valiantly, looking back from the height over that grey fog of rising smoke which marked the daily life of nearer London. All about her was a wide stretch of green, rising and falling from one round height to a lowland where several large ponds spread their black waters. The Heath, and the Parliament Hill Fields, were deserted. It was not the time of year, nor the day of the week, for this enormous and house-bound green to be peopled. Even children were at school. Only an occasional old gentleman or loitering out-of-work passed her, with hastily averted eyes of resentment and fear, and occasionally a girl or nurse with young children in a perambulator ambled by, munching fruit or studying a novelette as she trusted to the rim of grass to keep her path true. The paths yielded to Patricia's feet; the grass concealed mud, and was treacherous. But the fresh air was most sweet, and the exercise improved her *morale*, and every trouble in the world seemed to have drifted to a convenient distance. Patricia was breathing deeply with relief.

She walked upon the Heath for a couple of hours, and sat awhile upon a seat, exposed to every wind, until the cold began to make her uncomfortable; and then, with a plunge, she returned to the point from which the omnibuses start. Within half-an-hour Patricia was back in the West End, very much better, very much more able

to enjoy the crowds in Regent Street and Oxford Street. A short tour brought her to the end of the shops, and she found it was lunchtime. Still further refreshed by a light meal at a neighbouring teashop, she returned to the National Gallery; and stared at pictures until the extremely tiring pastime made her begin to yawn. Patricia knew that it was now—if she was going to keep to the schedule of her planned day—her duty to call upon Amy, and to Amy's studio in Fitzroy Street she accordingly went on foot.

Arrival at Amy's found her weary and depressed. She had begun once more to take a pessimistic view of her own affairs. When she had rung the bell Patricia had a momentary inclination to run away. To endure a talk here was the last thing for which she was prepared. It had been a ridiculous proposal. She wavered, feeling demoralised. The impulse to flight, however, was frustrated by the appearance at the door of Amy herself, very white and very puffy about the eyes, with a cigarette between her discoloured fingers, and her dress crumpled as though she had been lying down. Her short light-coloured hair was also rough, which strengthened the first quick impression. She looked ill and discontented.

"Oh, it's you," said Amy, not very agreeably. "I thought you'd forgotten I existed."

"Oh, how unkind, Amy. When I've come to see you!" cried Patricia, in rebuke.

"It's about time." Amy, after this laconic protest against neglect, led the way to the studio, and closed the door. Her gas-fire was fully alight, and a book lay face downwards upon a table which bore the remains of a meagre lunch. The bed had been made, and the brilliantly coloured spread was over it, but the studio was untidy and unswept. The early dusk was darkening it,

and the whole place had a dispirited air which chilled the visitor to the heart.

"I'm not going to excuse myself," continued Patricia, briskly, to cover her shrinking. "I'm a beast, and I know it, and I'm sorry. Don't be hard on me. I've been having a rushing time. How are you?"

Amy looked at her sourly, and Patricia was shocked to see how thoroughly ill she seemed. There was increased discontent in her expression, and the unkempt air she wore showed that Amy was taking no care of herself or of her person.

"I've seen you; and I've heard about you," Amy said.

"I hope I looked nice." Patricia was being painfully cheeky, because she was afraid. She had never been so afraid as she had been since her parting with Harry. "Are you all right?" The question was not merely perfunctory: it was drawn from her by real pity.

"No. I'm not. Patricia, I feel perfectly awful. Not with you—everything. I can't work, I can't do anything. I don't know what I shall do. I feel desperate."

"What's been happening?" Full of concern, Patricia turned from throwing her mackintosh over a chair, and regarded Amy with eyes in which contempt and dread mingled with her sympathy.

"Nothing's been happening. That's just it. *I* can't paint. I never *could* paint. It's all ridiculous. Ridiculous!" The words were blurted out in a breathless voice of pain. "I'm in hell!"

And with that Amy began to cry. Patricia put an arm round her, and felt the poor creature sobbing. But no tears came; the sobs were long drawn and agonised; and Amy could not weep.

"And nobody's come near you!" murmured Patricia, stricken with conscience. "Oh, you *poor* thing. You *poor* thing!" Amy jerked herself free, dabbing her eyes with

a handkerchief that had been soiled with paint. She stood there all puckered, terribly hostile to consolation.

"Don't!" she choked. "I can't stand being pawed! All the damned fools in the world have come. Damn them! Grinning and . . . Damn!" She began to blow her nose and to wipe her eyes, looking inexpressibly forlorn in her little linen dress without a waist. It was a piteous sight. An old woman stood there, facing bitter knowledge. Patricia could see that Amy's face was swollen with crying. She was evidently in a state of wretched misery, and yet what could be done? Nothing! Desiring pity, comfort, sympathy, Amy could yield herself to none of these, and her hysterical scorn for them was devastating. There was a long silence, awkward and increasingly embarrassed. Patricia stared downward, biting her lip, oppressed with the knowledge of her helplessness. When she spoke she could hear her own words, and her false voice, and the emptiness of her emotion.

"You'd better go away for a holiday," she suggested. "Go down to Cornwall."

"No." Amy jerked with impatient unhappiness. She was like a desperate animal that snarls at a rescuer. "I don't want to do anything. I don't want to see anybody." She controlled herself with a fierce effort, moving a few steps this way and that, and smoking furiously, until the cigarette was glowing and burning her lips. For a time during this paroxysm of fury there was silence; and then Amy went on in a curious dry disinterested voice: "Sit down, Patricia. Tell me what you've been doing. No, I'm all right. I'll stand up. I can't bear to keep still. Got a cigarette?" She lighted the fresh one from her burning stump, in the same grievous way leaning against the mantelpiece and again starting erect with nervous lack of self-control; and

every now and then she was shaken by a sob. Without waiting for Patricia's narrative, Amy went on viciously: "That brute Felix has been spiteful about me—and I don't care. I don't *care!* I'd like to kill him—all of them. All these grinning apes. . . . I *know* I can't paint. I'm no good at it. I never shall be any good. Well? What's it to do with them? They're all as glad . . . because I'm a woman. That's what it is. What it comes down to is naked sex jealousy. I *know*. I've known it all the time. And I've gone on, pretending to believe it, pretending I was taken in. I wasn't. They thought I didn't know they laughed at me. Well, I *did*. And it's I who laugh at *them*. I despise them. I'm no good; but they're no good, either! And I've told them so. There's *that* . . ."

Her voice had grown louder and more hysterical as she progressed. Patricia stood rooted, quite overcome by this torrential violence of anger and chagrin and revelation. But Amy's voice changed again. Almost beseechingly, she turned to her friend.

"But what am I to do, Patricia? I've spent all this money—pounds and pounds of it—and worked and worked and worked; and kept on and on, hoping . . . refusing to see." Then, suddenly again out of all control, she shouted. "And it's *no good!* D'you see? It's *no good!*" The suppressed rage in her voice was as if saturated with the bitter tears which she could not shed. The tears started to Patricia's eyes in sympathy. She was suffused with conscience-stricken loyalty.

"Where's Jack?" she demanded, fiercely. "What's *he* doing?"

"Jack!" It was almost a scream. "God! I hate the sight of him. Hate the sound of his rusty voice."

"D'you see him?"

"Do I not!" Amy was concentrated scorn. "Every

evening! He comes to cheer me up; and I could kill him, I'm so bored! He's driving me mad!"

Patricia made a little sound with her tongue. Here, if ever, was the occasion for Jack to be strong, to control matters. He must be stupid—stupid! She shook her head, frowning.

"Amy, dear; it's such a pity for you to be making yourself ill like this. Couldn't you . . ."

"I'm gloating in it!" came Amy's shrill interruption. "I'm enjoying it. It's not often a woman comes up against the sex war as clearly as this. If it had been a man—oh, very different. They'd have stopped me. They'd have criticised me sick. They'd have had no more consideration for my feelings than for a dog's feelings. But I'm a woman—to be teased and lured and flattered and laughed at. What d'you suppose all the praise of woman is? You see us praised. Yes, and why? To keep us quiet. Like giving sweets to a baby. Praise is our comforter. It's not meant. A man's given a chance to *learn* that he's a fool. We're not. We're up against honeyed lies. It's cotton-wool everywhere, for us, until we're broken by it. And all the time they're laughing—sniggering at us behind our backs. They don't care. They fool us to the top of our bent. They praise our daubs and our abortions of books; and to themselves they're doubled up with laughter. That's what woman's freedom means. That's what equality of the sexes means. It means broken hearts for women. Broken hearts for bloody failures! Oh, my God, my God, my heart will break!"

She began once more convulsively to sob; and Patricia, who was now herself white and shaken as the re-

sult of this tirade, was stricken with fear for her reason. These ghastly, tearing sobs were unbearable. They echoed in the lofty studio, rising, sometimes almost to the pitch of screams. For ten minutes they lasted, and then, gradually, with returns and relaxations of violence, Amy became quiet, and lay on her bed, drying her eyes. Long afterwards she began to talk in what was very nearly her ordinary voice.

"There, that's enough," she said. "I'm a fool. You're bad for me, Patricia. You make me lose my head. You look so kind and pretty, and as if you understood, which of course you don't in the least. No, if Jack was any good to me, I'd marry him at once just to get out of it. But a man who bores you is no good. I should leave him on the train somewhere, poor fool that he is. It's no good. We're all alone, Patricia. Each of us. You think you're not——"

"I know I *am*," swiftly corrected Patricia.

"Oho! So *you're* getting it, too. We all do, sooner or later; and you're the sort of pretty little fool who gets caught by her vanity. I've done it. You'll have a bad time before you're done. Yes, now I look at you I see you're a bit peaky. I suppose it's Harry Greenlees. Harry Greenlees, Good God!" Amy laughed with a strained satirical note. "Well, I warned you. I could have told you about all sorts of girls he's treated the same——"

Patricia's heart stopped beating for an instant.

"All sorts of girls?" she cried. "What d'you mean?"

Amy looked at her sharply, her face transformed, almost venomous. "Well, little Jean Cowley went away with him. It was all over in a month. They hardly notice each other now. She's through it. He's been the lover of half-a-dozen girls I know——"

"I don't believe you!" cried Patricia, perfectly white with anger.

Amy looked back with a superciliousness as great as her own.

"Jean Cowley told me all about it herself. I'm not a liar. Penelope Gorran . . . Phyllis Mickle. . . ."

"Amy!"

"I know what I'm talking about."

"Not whom you're talking to, though!" cried Patricia.

Amy became for the first time really intense. She rose from the bed and came across the studio, and Patricia could see her red eyes and the terrible white face all disfigured with angry grief.

"You're not his mistress, are you?" demanded Amy. "You poor fool!"

How far Patricia had travelled since their previous talk about girls and their lovers. She was not now stricken with shame at such a suggestion. She was merely indignant.

"Be quiet, Amy!" she cried. "You *can't* talk like that!"

Amy gave a short laugh, raising her arms in the air in a gesture of offensive marvel.

"Beautiful!" she said. "Beautiful!"

As they faced each other, both desperately angry, with opposed glances of hostility, breathing quickly in their common agitation, there came a ringing at the bell of Amy's studio. Slowly the blood rose and flooded Patricia's cheeks. She knew who was without. All her anger died. Its place was taken by fear. She was paralysed, knowing that the moment she had dreaded was upon her.

Harry entered the studio with impetuosity, and his height and energy made it a normal-sized room.

He made no pretence of having come to see Amy, but as soon as he caught sight of Patricia he addressed her.

"I thought I might find you here," he said, and stopped. His eyes embraced her, and Patricia's heart leapt. Then, uncontrollably, she turned away while Harry looked at Amy. "Sorry to be unceremonious; but I'd been to Patricia's," he said cheerfully. "Found she was out. How are you, Amy? I hear you've been having a fracas with old Felix. Poor old Felix! I wonder how he's feeling now, eh? Jolly rough on him—what? Now I want to get hold of Patricia, because we're going to a football match on Saturday, and didn't fix up a time of meeting. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all!" said Amy, sarcastically. "Ignore me. Use my studio as your own. Interrupt a conversation with the greatest assurance——"

"Thanks," answered Harry, not troubling to be polite. "I will." His blue eyes had their steel; and his cheerful face its grimness. "Now, Patricia . . ."

"Now, Harry." Patricia was recovering her nerve. At his insincerity, his rudeness to Amy, her spirits had risen. Whatever secret weaknesses her will might hint, she was sparkling with temper. He had entered a bully; well, she would not be bullied. She saw the difference of his demeanour to Amy, whom he disliked, and to herself, whom he loved. For how long would his behaviour remain different? In Jean Cowley's case it had been a month. "Now, Harry," said Patricia.

Harry's manner softened. His tone was lowered. His possessiveness was subtly mingled with appeal. He took a step forward, a big figure with bared teeth and that ready smile. There was no doubt of the effect he had on Patricia. She felt herself small, weak, laughing. . . . And yet not now yielding. A day ago she

would have been yielding, tasting all the sweetness of surrender to such masterful treatment.

"Put your coat on," pleaded Harry. He wore none himself. "I want you to come and have a meal with me."

"It's barely tea-time," objected Patricia.

"All the better. We'll have tea and dinner as well."

They both ignored Amy, who stood angrily staring at them.

"Why *should* she?" cried Amy. "What cheek!"

Harry turned upon Amy, and laughed at her.

"Hullo, Amy!" he answered. "You there? Sorry. Look here, I know it's cheek; and I apologise. But I must talk to Patricia, d'you see. Our last talk was interrupted."

"Patricia's talks seem to be subject to interruption. Her talk with me was interrupted."

"I know. By me," Harry said, charmingly. "It's too bad."

Patricia was mechanically putting on her mackintosh as they squabbled. She smoothed her hair; and a curious excitement which had risen in her was transformed into intrepidity. So may a man in danger become aware of new alert vitality. She heard the remarks without observing their content, so engrossed was she with thoughts of her own.

"How's Rhoda?" asked Amy suddenly. It came like a stab, and like a stab was Patricia's glance at Harry. His own glance towards her was as sharp, as keen.

"Very well, I think," said Harry, in a patient voice.

"She's away, isn't she?"

"I really don't know."

Amy again gave that strained laugh of sarcasm.

"Oho!" she laughed. "Harry!"

Harry held out his hand to Amy, seeing that Patricia

was ready. Amy ignored the hand. She never shook hands with anybody. It had always seemed to her more masculine and professional not to do so.

"You ready?" Harry asked Patricia.

"Awkward questions," murmured Amy, almost unheard. "Well, cheerio, Patricia. Perhaps one day we shall meet again. I shall be here, I expect."

"Do try to go away," whispered Patricia. "Really try. It's so bad for you to be alone." Harry was outside the door by now, and the parting was solitary. "Try to go away—just for change of thought and scene."

Amy shook her head—almost with a shudder.

"Now go," she said. "Harry's waiting. And Patricia—what I told you was *true*. D'you see? Not spiteful."

"I know. I know." Patricia pressed her hand and was gone.

viii

Outside, in the street, Harry was waiting.

"What a sight that woman is! Silly little fool!" he explained. "She's a cat, too. Did you notice that?"

"Look here, Harry," said Patricia, abruptly. "I don't want to listen to abuse of Amy. I'm sorry for her."

"Oh, God, so am I!" cried Harry, lightly.

"No, I'm really sorry. You don't understand." With sudden indignation, she concluded: "You couldn't *ever* understand. You don't know enough."

"Well?" He was quite cool. "I see you're in a rage about something."

"I'm not in a rage about anything; but I do resent your coming to the studio as if I belonged to you. You've got no right to do that. I came out because I didn't want a row before Amy."

"Oh! A row!" Harry turned a laughing, coaxing face to her, very sure of himself. His hand was at her arm; but Patricia was completely mistress of herself.

"Yes, a row," she cried, her eyes sparkling afresh. "Let's go and have tea somewhere."

Harry's face was also alight. If Patricia had temper, so, it appeared, had he. They were matched.

"That was exactly my idea," he said impudently. "Let's!"

They walked through into Oxford Street and joined the crowd there. Such teashops as the one at which Patricia had lunched were unsuitable. They were at this hour too crowded for conversation. As a result the journey was for a time without result; but, at last they came to a big restaurant at which few visitors to the West End imagined that such a thing as tea would be served. Here it was that, surrounded by innumerable empty tables, and at a distance from half-a-dozen pensive waiters, amid gilded mouldings and huge mirrors and imposing candelabra, Harry and Patricia seated themselves for their talk.

"Now!" cried Harry. "Tea, crumpets, cakes. No crumpets? Toast." He instructed the waiter with the assurance of one who has entertained since the days of undergraduate life. Having seen the waiter depart upon his errand, he then cleared a vase of flowers from the table, and moved a dish which stood in his way. Then, with wrists upon the table, he stared at Patricia. "Darling!" he said. "I seem to feel most at home with you when you're in a rage. There's a little nick . . . see. . . ."

"Never mind the little nick," said Patricia, sternly. Her heart had begun to sink again. "I wasn't going to talk to you like this; but I must." Harry waved his hand, as if giving her free permission to change her mind

without restraint. "I want to ask you several things. You needn't answer if you don't want to. . . ."

"You want to ask me about Rhoda!" suggested Harry, his smile deepening. There was no quelling his easy confidence.

"That was one thing," admitted Patricia, also in no way superficially discomposed, although her heart was struggling.

"I thought so. Well, now, Rhoda—mind, I'm very fond of her—is nothing at all to me."

"Has she been?"

"Oh! Oh!" He protested at such a demand. "No, she hasn't been. I admit that she may think . . . I'd better put it like this: she thinks she's in love with me."

"I see. Then, the other thing I wanted to ask is this. You see, I'm not sure if I'm in love with you or not."

"You soon would be," he interrupted. "Sure, I mean. I'm in love with you."

"That was just it. You've been in love before."

"Lots of times. Never as much as this, Patricia!" He stretched his hands towards her. Patricia hesitated. Then she shook her head.

"You mustn't joggle me," she said. "I've got to find out for myself."

"Well, was that all you wanted to ask me? If so, I'll tell you something. You've got the most beautiful eyes, Patricia; and your little mouth changes every——"

"That wasn't all," cried Patricia, and stammered, the warmth rising to her cheeks. She could see him so near, and his ardent glance and air of conscious and indulgent charm were intoxicating to her; and she was shot through and through with the knowledge that Harry could be brutal and harsh and tyrannical, that he could be brusque and unfeeling; that the thick stream of emotion which she was conscious of recognising in him made for satiety

and not for the delicate, whimsical, pervasive love she craved. She had been going to ask him other things—things which it was essential to her peace of mind both now and in the future that she should know; and she could not do so. They, whether she had a right to them or not, were all of no account beside her certainty. He was a stranger at heart, who should have been master of her finest and truest consciousness. Patricia paled, her hands sharply together. "No!" she cried. "I can't marry you. It's too great a risk. I can't do it!"

"And who on earth," said Harry, "who on earth *asked* you to marry me?"

ix

Patricia felt her heart jump and then turn cold. She stared at him.

"Oh," she stammered. "Oh . . . then . . . then that's all right, isn't it? I thought you wanted me to. I . . ." She gave a small nervous laugh. "What *do* you mean, then?"

"Look here," said Harry. "I'm in love with you, and you're in love with me."

"No," said Patricia. "I'm clear about that now."

"You're not. You're in love with me." Harry was overbearing in his confidence. His face had not lost its beaming affection and good nature, but the power to charm her was vanished. "And so you think of marriage. Well, there's no question of that, because I know something about myself and about you. It wouldn't last. How could it? Love's a rapture."

"We don't mean the same thing," replied Patricia, steadily, meeting his eyes frankly, and with defiance. The coldness which had possessed her on the previous evening was reinforced by a pride that was insane in its egotism.

"When people say 'Love and Marriage' they're not thinking of us. Marriage belongs to the days of women's economic dependence," he asserted.

"It belongs to the idea of constancy."

"When a woman was economically dependent," pursued Harry, ignoring the interruption, "she said 'what will you give for my love? Will you support me for life?' That's altered now. She gives love for love."

"And when she's broken?" Patricia's anger began to manifest itself. "Do you think other men think as you do? I mean, when they're offered something soiled?"

"Soiled?" Harry's astonishment was marked. "That doesn't arise."

Patricia controlled herself.

"To me it does," she said, gravely. "Not to you."

"Good Lord! I'd no idea you were such a little . . . puritan!" cried Harry. Into his air of unconquerable charm came the faintest sneer; but it was not strong enough to wound. He was genuinely perturbed and unable to fathom her objection to something which for himself was a standard of conduct.

"Yes, you were mistaken, weren't you?" said Patricia. "You didn't know I was a . . . prig!"

"No, no!" He was handsome in his protest. "It's a question of truth—of sense. Patricia, it's a question of purity. The delight of love doesn't last. What is the good of pretending that it does? My dear, I love you. I'm not trying to seduce you. Never!"

"My dear Harry," exclaimed Patricia, "you're talking to the wrong person. You think that love is just self-indulgence. Perhaps you're right. You may be right. I can't tell. But you see I don't think like that. I admit that I . . ." She could not proceed. "I'm not even thinking of sacrifices. I'm thinking of happiness."

"You're refusing it, my dear," said Harry.

"Then it's not worth having."

He turned aside with brusqueness. He even shrugged. It was in his case not viciousness, not deliberate sophistry. He had merely mistaken Patricia's readiness to accept his standards. To Harry these were the common sense of love. He was not at all unclean. It was astonishment at a question that made him thus obtuse. The waiter came to their table and began to spread the cups and plates with absorbed deftness. Patricia, her mind elsewhere, watched him with constraint. When once the waiter had gone, she said breathlessly to Harry:

"Look here, Harry. I can't eat any of this. It would make me sick. I'm going. I'm sorry to . . ." She rose to her feet, trembling. Harry rose too, masterfully.

"Shut up, Patricia. Sit down, and don't . . . Look here, we'll talk about it. I'll make you see my point of view. I'm not trying to . . ."

"I'm going. You eat it. I'm . . . I don't want . . ."

Patricia stood there, her eyes stern but loving; reproachful and contemptuous. There was still a moment; and it passed. She turned swiftly, and left Harry standing by the table. He called once; but his fear of attracting attention in a public place held him there. It was the one thing which would have restrained him. Sick at heart, but with her head erect, Patricia walked quickly out of the restaurant and into the street. She felt that her heart was breaking.

CHAPTER NINE: MISCHIEF

i

FOR two days Patricia kept within doors. She was broken and weary. For a time it was as though she had lost all the pride which had sustained her at the parting with Harry. She longed to see him, longed to beg for anything at all at his hands; and was restrained only by some timid delicacy, some fear, some paralysis of the will. The days were spent in sitting in her little front room, staring apathetically before her, or without seeing them at the fire and the murky sky. The nights were even more torturing, for if Patricia slept at all it was to dream hideously; while her wakeful tossings were almost unendurable. Harry, of course, came to the house; but Lucy was staunch, and he had been sent away with elaborate lies. Never until this moment had Patricia understood how much warmth and generosity lay behind the pink smudge of Lucy's face. She had been forced into half-confidence; and Lucy had understood the whole. At first, shrewdly, she had taken a consoling view. "Expect it'll come right," she had said, out of a deep knowledge of feminine psychology. "You feel queer now. You're all of a twitter. Then you'll want 'im, and go out and meet 'im somewhere on the sly. And—" But she had very quickly discovered that the break was serious. "Ah!" she had said. "All for the best, you and 'im bein' so fair, with blue eyes and all. I expect the babies would have been little niggers." She had sworn, refusing Harry's tips, that Patricia had gone into the country, leaving no address. Her

pink face had glowed with the most righteous honesty. A letter had followed, a long letter full of explanations; and Patricia, although it had deeply moved her, had left it without acknowledgment. A further letter, asking for at least an interview, had been similarly ignored.

She was quite at a loss. Harry had meant so much to her, both in fact and in her happy dreams of love, that she was miserable without him. She knew that her silence was inexcusable; that it would make him think her merely the little suburban prig of his supposition. But the facts which were turned over and over in her mind—the sudden intuitions which had been the occasion of the crisis, his own attitude to marriage, the illuminations provided by Amy—were devastating. Patricia could not deal with them. They were too much for her. At times she tried to reason with herself. Fear sprang to her heart, and reduced her to panic. She made an attempt even to analyse her own sense of shock, to say that it was stupid, that it was squeamish, old-fashioned, babyish. Useless! The truth was, more bitter than any merely cowardly flinching. Whatever might be her feeling in the future, she was almost hysterically determined at this moment. Her mind leapt on to blacker thoughts of Harry, and recoiled from them. All the curious exaggerations of wickedness which will arise in the most virgin minds tempted her own. They were repulsed. She was not yet sophisticated enough to be ready to believe the alarmist suggestions of her imagination.

At last she wrote to Harry:

“Dear Harry: I was silly to leave you under a wrong impression. I had been thinking I was in love with you; and then I had suddenly realised that I couldn’t *marry* you. I wasn’t shocked at the thought that you only

wanted to have an affair with me. I had just felt that you weren't any use to me, and that I wasn't any use to you. I am very fond of you. I have never been so attracted to any one. It isn't enough for me. I want lots more. Sorry, Harry. Patricia."

To this letter there had been no answer. Harry, evidently, was lying low.

ii

So the matter stood, and Patricia was drowned in bewilderment and shame for as long as her first mood lasted. But then young buoyancy revived. On the third night she slept, and her dreams were sweeter. On awakening she was still unhappy; but as she lay in bed and her little thoughts darted about like shadows of birds she had suddenly an overwhelming fit of arrogance.

"Pooh!" cried Patricia, violently throwing back the bedclothes. She stepped out of bed and stood there, yawning, with her hands clasped behind her head, and her cheeks resting lightly against her raised arm. Downstairs Lucy had begun her strong clouting of the furniture. The morning was still grey. And as she stood there Patricia caught a movement in the mirror by the window, and was drawn across the room to it. In the mirror's depths she saw her own sleepy face; her little fall of hair, her soft cheeks, "two witch's eyes above a cherub's mouth," and the beautiful line of her neck. "I'm pretty!" she said to herself. "I'm pretty, and I know it. I've got taste. I've got brains. Pooh!"

And with that she went back to bed, to await the arrival of Lucy with the hot water. Wave after wave of arrogance passed through her in healthy reaction to her earlier despair. "I'm better off than Amy," she thought.

"I'm cleverer than she is—not such an idiot. Rhoda . . . poor thing! Poor thing to be *known* to be in love, and by a man who doesn't care for you at all. Unless he made it up! I wonder!" Did men pretend sometimes, as girls did, that they were loved? She expected so. She had known a girl who thought all men were in love with her, who thought a man must either love her or dislike her. Well, Patricia did not believe in that assumption. She admitted candidly that, although they seemed to like her, all the men she knew were not in love with herself. "It's very funny," she said, ruminating. "People in love. . . . I suppose there are all sorts of ways of being in love. There's Harry's way, which is just self-indulgence. There's Jack Penton's way, which is silly devotion to somebody who doesn't care *that*! There's . . . oh, there's lots of ways. And my way—or my thought of way . . . Perhaps it's only . . . Pooh! If I don't love a man I needn't marry him. You can do all sorts of things, if you aren't one of these silly little creatures who give in. I'd live with him—if I loved him. I don't love Harry: that's why I wouldn't. . . ." This, however, was bravado; and she passed on, ignoring the gross lapse into indelicate falsehood. "But he'd have to love me better than himself. That's it! I've got to be *loved*; not just wanted. I've got to be needed, and adored, and passionately wanted, and respected, and understood. Then I should be *sure*, and then I'd give back love for love—full measure. I'm too good for this ordinary love—this sort of 'affair' that Harry likes; or the marriage that's like taking a situation—'permanency.' I'm too good for it. I need half-a-dozen husbands to do me justice. I don't have to take what I can get. I'm . . . I'm Patricia Quin!"

She was filled with supreme egotism.

iii

When little Jacky Dean called for her on the Saturday evening, Patricia was still full of her healing arrogance. She greeted Jacky rather sweepingly, because he was a young man who invited disdain; and in two minutes had received fresh reassurance as to her superiority to all other girls. Jacky was, in fact, the open-mouthed fair young man with whom she had found herself left at Topping's. He was always perfectly dressed, because he was wealthy and without occupation; and he was by way of being infatuated with Patricia. He was always at her service, always eager to stand a dinner or a dance, or a *revue* or musical play. Conversation beyond the "top-hole" stage he was incapable of reaching; but he was very dog-like, and looked sweetly pink and golden; and his dancing had improved; and he was never any strain, as he made no demands at all, but merely sought to be useful and obliging. He had two thousand pounds a year, with the prospect of more when an elderly aunt died; and he would proudly have married Patricia on the morrow. No wonder, therefore, that she was kind to him in a disdainful way, and refrained from hurting his feelings. Nothing would have made her marry him—the thought of doing so had never entered her mind; but she found his devotion rather pathetic at times, and always, in spite of the discipline Jacky received, most timidly fervent.

Jacky was subservient by nature. He had attached himself to the purlieus of the stage door as soon as he had become a man; he was a feature of river parties in the summer and every other sort of party for the remainder of the year. In physique he was a weed; but there was nothing noticeably the matter with him, beyond an amiable lack of brain. He was everybody's

pet, as one who would never grow up and who never minded paying. Pleasure, in Jacky's case, was no feverishly-sought goal, but a state of being so customary as to limit his interests. His wan little face, with its air of constant innocence, was still that of a child. Whatever adventures he might have had in connection with the stage door had left him unscarred. He was still the delicious babe of his unripe years. Patricia found him easily manageable; he had never even dared to put his arm round her in a taxicab, although obviously he would have liked to venture this exploit. She had a considerable sense of power when she was in his company, and nothing had ever occurred to weaken it.

Jacky's idea of the evening was dinner in the West End, salted with cocktails in plenty, with champagne, and with old brandy. Then a taxi would carry them from Regent Street to South Hampstead in a fit state to enjoy a rowdy dance, during which Jacky, laughing with joy, would assist the band. But Patricia checked his enthusiasm. On no account could she risk a meeting with Harry—she even dreaded that he might appear at Monty's,—and her own plan was less ambitious. It was she who named the restaurant—an obscure place to which she knew Harry would never think of going; and Jacky was too mild of spirit to resist. They went therefore to this shabby place—the Axminster—where all was faded cream and gold, with rusty palms and magenta lamp-shades and artificial flowers and vulgar mirrors and English waiters. It is true that Jacky's face fell at sight of the bill of fare, and still more at the meagre printed wine list (with alterations in a crabbed handwriting), but in the midst of his furtive glance round preparatory to suggestion of flight he was diverted by the sound of a popular one-step as played to applause by the restaurant orchestra. He subsided, looking with

shallow-pated amusement at all the respectable men and women of middle age who sat around them. If Jacky's simple-minded ingenuity in the matter of painting the restaurant red came to nothing, at least, as Patricia could tell, he was perfectly happy to be dining alone with his goddess; and the meal was carried through, upon his part, with a silence as complete as lack of ideas for conversation could make it.

iv

Patricia liked Jacky. Although silly and lacking in brains, he was very honest and very good-natured. When she said to him that she was out of sorts, and wanted to be quiet, he did not become fussy, and he did not sulk. He did naturally what was the best thing to do in the circumstances. When he thought of anything to say he said it, in his queer unlettered English; and when he had nothing at all to say, he cheerfully allowed himself to be silent. There was no difficulty at all. Patricia, although she was in such a state of advanced conceit, had one sweep of comprehension; and she was touched to the point of moist eyes and an ejaculation.

"You *are* a sport, Jacky!" she said, impetuously.

Jacky glowed. The colour came creeping up from behind his tall collar, and he jerked his neck out of the collar with a nervous movement, as of one whose throat has suddenly become swollen.

"Er . . . Quite all right," he said, in his jargon. "Cheers; and all that . . ."

No more was said. They ploughed a way unsuccessfully through an ill-cooked meal, of which the major part was encased in thicknesses of flour and water which had been very severely fried.

"Er . . . saw old Harry," presently said Jacky.

"Last night—yesterday—I forget. He . . . thought you were away, or something. Thought you'd forgotten our evening. Jolly glad you turned up. Er . . . Must have been your . . ."

"He's not coming, is he?" Patricia's head was down. She was struggling to remain composed. That was what this meant: wherever she went she would see Harry, would hear of him. And she knew she *wanted* to see him, *wanted* to hear of him. It was the strangest sensation. Harry to her was become a stranger; she realised that she knew nothing and always had known nothing of his heart. But all the time she was deeply concerned with him. He was a stranger; but he was the only stranger she knew in that vast crowd of strangers. Patricia awaited Jacky's answer with dread.

"I forget what he said," answered Jacky, slowly and vaguely. "No, I don't think he could come. The old fellow was . . . er . . . some jolly old thing or other. I quite forget."

Patricia nodded. She must accustom herself to all this sort of thing. She had only to be firm when they met—firm and friendly (ah! how easy to contemplate; how hard to execute!), and all would settle itself. It was not like . . . Oh, how silly life was! thought Patricia. Her eyelids fluttered. How alone she felt! Sometimes it seemed to her that with all these friends she had no friend. What was the cause? Was it in herself? Impossible! She said that last word aloud.

"Pardon?" asked Jacky, only half hearing Patricia's exclamation.

Patricia laughed at his surprised face.

"Only talking to myself," she assured him. "What's the time?"

"Have a Kümmel," urged Jacky. "Cures anything." His own face was irradiated with a cheerful and mean-

ingless smile. Patricia's heart sank. He was one of her friends. She was torn between shame for him, shame of herself for thinking shame of him, and a sense of superiority to her contemporaries.

v

They reached Monty's by half-past nine; and Patricia was struck by the difference between her sensations now and upon her first visit. Then, it had been fairyland. But she saw the studio with changed eyes. It was not so large or so beautiful; the people were not so handsome or remarkable. She looked round upon them with interest, but it was not as an astonishing body. It was with curiosity as to the composition of the gathering. Fully half of them were now known to her as acquaintances. The noise they made was familiar; she had no longer the feeling of fresh enthusiasm. She was restless and dissatisfied.

Only Monty still attracted her. She thought him easily more distinguished than any of his guests. Where they all appeared to say the same thing over and over again, he, by his silence, his inscrutable air of seeing everything and knowing everything, soothed and charmed her. When Monty danced with her she was happy. He was unlike the rest. Patricia could dance a whole evening with Jacky, and be unaware that there was any current between them of more than common enjoyment of moderate proficiency in dancing. But she could not dance once with Monty without feeling his magnetism. There was something amazing in his dexterity, in his immovable calm. To be with him was to be as one hypnotised. Monty's low, soft tones, with that singular rise at the end of each sentence; his certainty of resource; his extreme delicacy of movement and his fas-

tidious politeness—these were the instruments of his hypnotic power. But the feeling she had that he was so wise in the affairs of life, so bored by them, so expert in handling them, went with a corresponding feeling that he was greatly attracted to herself. Monty's almost exaggerated respect, and the incessant flattery of his conciliatory manner, all moved Patricia to happiness. And her happiness was the whole time salted by the feeling that she did not trust him, that she must never be off her guard with him. It made Monty the more flattering, the more attractive. He moved her. He made her forget Harry.

There was something in Monty's manner which caused Patricia to feel that he knew all about Harry and herself—all about everything Harry had ever done; and that she would never know how much he knew of herself. She felt that nothing would ever surprise him, or move him; and yet at the same time she knew that he was a refined voluptuary, and that the soothing calm of Monty affected her own senses as even Harry's beauty and vitality and eager affection for herself had not done. She danced three or four times with Monty; and each time she danced with him it was as though she received from his touch a subtle current that made her, if not wiser, at least more experienced in the art of living dangerously and with relish.

To Jacky, afterwards, she said:

"Monty's an epicure. An epicure in sensation."

"Er . . . yes," said Jacky, agreeably. Patricia thought her cliché enlightening. Jacky's vacant face was not. She had the feeling that she towered above Jacky.

"Nobody could say that of you," she remarked. But her tone was less offensive than her words. "You're just a nice little boy. You don't know *anything*."

Jacky shot her a look of infantile cunning.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed, with a small feeble simulation of heartiness. It roused Patricia's affection for him. She felt he really *was* a nice little boy, clean and unpretentious, not at all baffling or sophisticated or exciting. They danced together again; and Patricia felt how pleasant and uneventful it was to dance with Jacky.

vi

Patricia did not dance again that evening with Monty; but he spoke to her before she left. He had been bidding good-bye to some guests as Patricia was leaving; and Jacky was farther away, struggling with his overcoat. Monty, in the tapestried hall, subdued to dimness by the method by which it was lighted, looked like a Pasha. He was swarthy and impassive and alluring. Patricia had that quick feeling—of loose robes and a turban; and sherbet and willing slaves who came obediently in response to a clapping of hands. She imagined heavy incense, and the plashing of fountains and all the delights of those stories she had read of the East, and Monty was the Pasha of these stories. . . . He came to Patricia as she emerged cloaked and hooded and ready for the road.

"I'm sorry you're going," he said in his low voice. "We must dance again soon."

There was flattery in his manner; he made Patricia feel that he thought her beautiful and marvellous and charming and full of grace and tenderness. She stood beside him, as tall as Monty, but very slender and youthful, a complete contrast in her fairness.

"Yes, we must dance again soon," agreed Patricia.

"But how soon?" asked Monty. "Next week? Tomorrow?—Monday?"

He was not at all urgent: his tone was gentle, almost caressing.

"Tuesday," suggested Patricia.

He bowed his head. Jacky had approached; and they both ignored him. He was the unnecessary third to their conversation. And Patricia had the feeling of danger. She was charmed and flattered. She suddenly felt that Monty was not the Pasha of her moment's invention, but that he was as sleek and perhaps as treacherous as a collie; and a recklessness seized her at the knowledge that behind his charm there might lie something that threatened all peace. If Harry had not been dismissed the charm might have been neutralised. Harry was gone. She had nothing but her own pleasure to think of, nothing but sensation and the confusion of the future.

Their farewells were said. With Jacky, Patricia was upon the way from the house. She still carried with her the sensation of having been enveloped by something as light as a mist. She was pleased and excited.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TEN: EDGAR HEARS A WISEACRE

i

THE Windmill Club lies in one of the streets on the north side of Piccadilly. It is a tedious grey building, quite unimpressive in its exterior, and to those who pass along the street it appears to be no more than a couple of large houses to which entry is obtained by a single central doorway. Once the door has been passed, however, the club has every air of sober comfort. To come into its basking warmth from a cold London breeze, to pass up the steps beyond the glass-enclosed office of the guardian porter, and to walk into an enormous dining room marred only by outrageous portraits of the undying great, is to encounter a different world from the world of every day. It is not a political club, but will be found mentioned in Whitaker's Almanac with the description "Social and the Arts." The members are of all ages, and they include lawyers, writers, artists, and business men. They do not play high, and they do not drink heavily; yet the club's cellar is famous, and there are both card and billiard rooms of some dimensions. It was to this club that Edgar Mayne belonged, although he seldom visited it. He had found the Windmill after depressing experience of most of the other West End clubs, and he had now been a member of it since just before the beginning of the War. Its comfort, to Edgar, lay in its silence, its freedom from aggressively-opinionated politicians of the envious rank, and its well-controlled hospitality. The Windmill possessed an efficient committee. More need not be said in order to dis-

tinguish it precisely from its fellows; although as comfort is a common feature of clubs the distinction lay rather in the fact that the Windmill was solvent and self-supporting.

One night about a week later than the events last described Edgar, who had been on the Continent during the whole of the preceding six weeks, was dining at his club in company with a man called Gaythorpe. His companion was one of those hard-working city men who look as though they live wholly out-of-doors. Gaythorpe, in fact, was a keen golfer; but he was not among those golfers who weary with anecdote or the description of links. He was a tall thin fellow of sixty, with a face that was ruddy yet lean, with eyes almost black and melting enough to have been those of a Jew, and a small mouth which never gave any indication of his thoughts. Naturally grave, Gaythorpe had a pervasive sense of humour which was a substitute for imagination, as it sometimes is in those of low vitality and broad experience. He was white-haired and spectacled, long-sighted and unemotional; and he had been knighted before the War on account of expert financial services to a dead government. His directorial connection with a large bank had been founded upon his skill in finance, and he was one of those older business men who had the greatest belief in Edgar's sagacity, both private and commercial. Sagacity, Gaythorpe was in the habit of saying, was one of the rarest qualities to be possessed by a man. He rated it above brilliance and above patience. Edgar's sagacity was with Gaythorpe unquestionable. It was the corner-stone of Gaythorpe's pleasure in their association.

The two men were at a small table with a shaded light which stood right in a corner of the big dark room. Both were in evening dress, and their faces were ob-

scured by the dim light, except that the gold rims of Gaythorpe's spectacles occasionally gleamed. They were alone, for no other diners sat near, and they had eaten a small but highly agreeable meal. A bottle of still Moselle stood between them, nearly empty; and the extraordinary faint fragrance of its contents hung in the air. Edgar, whose information at the moment was coloured by the dominant wishes and prejudices of those Frenchmen and Germans with whom he had talked while abroad, was moderately expressing his view of the attitude of foreign traders in general. He was not cheerful, because he had found in all the centres which he had visited a uniformity of depression which he could not gainsay. But neither was he hopeless. He sat very quietly, still the undistinguished man of Patricia's first glimpse, but obviously more in keeping with his surroundings here than he had been at either of Monty's parties. When one looked at him a second time one perceived that the outward sign of Edgar's quality lay in one peculiarity of carriage. He did not, as Monty always did, convey a sense of threat, of sleeping cruelty; there was not in Edgar, as there was in Harry, a buoyant masterfulness. Very quiet, very brown in hair and eyes and skin, he commanded from those who waited here, as from those who dealt otherwise with him, a willing respect in which there was no fear of menace. The quality which marked him was a sureness that belongs exclusively to dignity, which comes from a tranquil heart. He could be ignored at a distance, but never ignored in the personal relation, because it is there that character tells most surely. Gaythorpe had spoken little during the meal. He had listened soberly throughout, never at any point relaxing his own judgment of the facts and of the speaker.

"All you say confirms my own view," Gaythorpe was commenting thoughtfully. "It confirms the reports we've been getting. It's no good being bold, you think?"

Edgar smiled, shaking his head.

"I wonder what you mean by 'bold,'" he said. Gaythorpe, watching him, caught the lightness behind his friend's gravity, but he did not smile. He waited. He was not the only one of those older men who had this strange warming of the heart towards Edgar. Although trustworthiness may generally command respect, it is only truly valued in terms of affection by those to whom it is not a reproach.

"Exactly 'bold,'" he remarked at last. "Just 'bold.'"

"It's always worth while to be generous," answered Edgar.

"Personally, perhaps." Gaythorpe hesitated. "But in business—my dear boy!"

"Well, you've had conferences and committees sitting for years, and discussing things all over the world. They cut a figure in the press. Does any one believe in them as productive of solutions? They're like letters, or any other form of imitation dignity. It's quite easy to hit on a formula; but the formula isn't a reality. Once get a group of men together with conflicting interests——"

"A common interest," supplemented Gaythorpe. "It's come to that when the world's in danger of bankruptcy."

"Conflicting self-interest. Any number of people can agree on a principle; but bring them into relation with others dominated by a rival self-interest, and you're helpless."

"Pool your self-interest. Face it," Gaythorpe suggested. "Use it as the basis of agreement."

Edgar smiled slightly, his hands clasped upon the table.

"You'll never do that in international finance," he said. "At any rate, as long as nationalism's a gospel."

"Oh, I agree. But that's precisely what we've got to kill." Gaythorpe was so eager that he raised a finger. Edgar leaned forward, his face no longer at all grave. He looked at the old man with compassion.

"Travel, my friend. You'll become a defeatist," he said. "Nationalism's such an easy thing to teach. Besides, selfishness is the gospel of the day. You really *must* take human beings into account. How are you going to move them? Not by altruism. There *are* good men, who think in good-will; but they can't imagine other men in bulk. They talk about Germans, or wages, or exports; but they don't feel reality when they do that. I mean, not the reality of wine upset or a train to catch or a toothache. It's all like casting a column of figures. They don't feel themselves personally affected. Any more than they do when they talk of stabilising the world. No. The only thing is to work for some defined clash, to formulate an altruistic policy and give it a selfish aim. Then embark on a campaign of propaganda, showing that it pays to be good and do right—that it's going to reduce income tax or the cost of petrol. Enlarge your group. Make it first English—Anglo-Saxon—European—then World-wide. But you've got to make it a party policy, an issue. Have a scrap—a scrap of ideas and convictions. Divide England into two fierce political camps, and restore political life in England. Then carry your policy into action. You could sweep the world in a generation."

Gaythorpe good-humouredly shook his head.

"It's an altruistic resolution in itself," he objected. "You'd be bankrupt long before you succeeded. You'd

have burnt your house to roast your pig. But I'm glad to find you such an idealist. If you carry such principles into your private life it must be exciting. All the same, rather Quixotic."

Edgar laughed slightly.

"Oh," he said. "As to private life, I'm a sentimentalist like yourself."

"I wonder." Gaythorpe pondered.

"On the surface. It's self interest at bottom, I expect. If I try to do good it's to gratify myself. I want other people to do what I think is good for them."

Gaythorpe was pleased at the turn which Edgar's remarks had taken, because Edgar too seldom spoke about himself, and this was a subject which interested Gaythorpe, who was really human, more than most others. Further, this was a side of Edgar which he did not know, and it had its attractiveness upon that score also.

"If you try to help them," Gaythorpe suggested, "it must be from disinterested goodwill."

"Not always," replied Edgar, very promptly. "It's a complex question. But why do I—why does anybody else do the same?—help willingly those I like—those who are young and attractive, or those who move my affection? Why don't I help those I dislike? Why do I feel, at any rate, extremely unwilling to help those I dislike?"

"Because it would be morbid self-mortification to help anybody you dislike."

"No, no. I'm thinking of a state of mind. If I can help somebody I like, it's a perfectly instinctive thing. But just remember how many objections and difficulties rush to your mind when you're asked to help somebody who is disagreeable to you."

Gaythorpe answered shrewdly enough:

"You're thinking of somebody in particular?"

Edgar started.

"In both instances," he agreed. "No, in one only."

Gaythorpe gave a snort of pretended annoyance. His keen old face was benevolent.

"That's the worst of these damned generalisations," he cried. "One sees them exploded each instant. You see fifty people abroad, and you put their views into a general statement of the actual position of millions. You come back. You find, perhaps, a letter—two letters——"

"One letter," corrected Edgar.

"Exactly. And they say women have the monopoly of that form of inflation!"

"I'm not going into details," calmly warned Edgar. "My generalisations were quite—quite general. The fact that I had a letter is an accident. It doesn't affect the generalisation."

Gaythorpe was a cunning man. He was sixty, and he knew something of the world. He said, in a tone which was altogether respectful:

"As you know, I'm not . . . not exactly given to sentimental questioning; but was your letter from a woman?"

"From a man," explained Edgar, with a touch of malice. "About his own financial affairs. It had no relation whatever to a woman."

"Hm," grunted Gaythorpe. "I think you said he was the unattractive person?"

"The attractive person was hypothetical," said Edgar.

"Oh, yes," agreed Gaythorpe. "Quite so. Quite so. Well, after all, you've been away over a month; and much may happen in that time. I didn't, of course, suppose that you had any specially young and attractive beneficiary in mind. It would not have occurred to me." He was silent for an instant after this somewhat dry

protest. "Nevertheless, I . . . I must own to considerable interest in your correspondent, since he . . . ah . . . affects you——"

"No." Edgar smilingly shook his head. "You're a very inquisitive old man; and you have a great gift for wheedling information. But you won't get any more. Come and smoke now."

He rose from the table.

"I was *so* interested," grumbled Gaythorpe; and stood up to his lean height of six feet. He followed Edgar across the room, and there waited. His thin face was unreadable; but he was consumed with curiosity.

iii

When the two men were in the smoking room, and deep down in comfortable armchairs, with large and delicious cigars, they spoke no more of business or the world at large. Gaythorpe had been married for a quarter of a century, and he had three boys in whose progress he took deep interest. It was of the boys that he spoke—Cyril, who had left Oxford and was devoting himself to archæology; Roland, who was still at the University; and Alistair, who was at Marlborough. Of Mrs. Gaythorpe he for some time said nothing. But at last he mentioned her.

"D'you know we've been married twenty-five years?" he demanded. "I was thirty-five, and now I'm sixty. You're thirty-seven, and unmarried. You ought to marry soon—before you're forty, because otherwise you won't enjoy your children as I've done. It's a point to bear in mind."

Edgar slightly frowned.

"I shan't marry now," he said. Gaythorpe laughed, a sudden chuckling old man's full laugh.

"By Jove, that's a dangerous thing to say!" he protested. "It's the most dangerous and suspicious remark in the world. I don't think you'll escape marriage. Some young fly-away will make up her mind to settle down; and you'll be pleasantly surprised to find yourself happily married."

"A fly-away?" Edgar raised his brows. "That sounds alarming. I suppose on the principle of the reformed rake. However, I've got an open mind. I admit that I want children; but as far as I can see the people I know don't have them."

"What a sterile crew you must know."

"No. Just platonic."

Gaythorpe smiled at the sarcasm.

"What is the general length of the childless marriage?" he asked. "The average."

"I haven't noticed. I don't know. A couple of years? Five years? At any rate, I see no point in the ceremony. But the thing arises from excessive individualism among women; and I don't see any way out of it. The only justification of the man who insists on children is his wife's love; and if the wives are fuller of self-love I can't see why they should be forced to undergo the pains of childbirth."

"My dear Edgar," said Gaythorpe. "Don't be sentimental. The people who most acutely feel the pains of childbirth are sentimental men. That a woman should suffer great physical pain for twenty-four hours, and a good deal of nervous distress for some time before her delivery, perhaps two or three times in the course of her life, is no reason why (if she's reasonably robust) she shouldn't have children. If there's an exaggerated fear of physical pain, or a great deal of egotism, in the woman you want to marry, call the whole thing off at once."

Edgar was faintly irritated.

"You can't dictate nowadays," he said. "That's past. Women have got to be treated—the women that one could marry, I mean—as equals. They've got to have an opportunity of living to the full extent of their powers."

"Well," said Gaythorpe, very deliberately. "I'm going to say something you'll dislike. I'm going to say that no woman who has any inclination to love you will thank you for treating her as an equal. She'll think it a weakness in you. She won't understand it. Women are so constituted that they associate consideration with indifference."

"You were talking a little while ago about generalisations," murmured Edgar.

"Perhaps I was. But what I say is true."

"You leave out of account," said Edgar, "in your old-fashioned conceptions,—the fact that an individual woman is always—in spite of her sex—exactly what an individual man is. She's always first of all a human being."

"Sometimes," responded Gaythorpe, with an excessively benevolent air; "sometimes, do you know, I'm very strongly disposed to question whether a woman can properly be regarded as a human being at all."

iv

"And now," continued Gaythorpe, towards the end of their conversation, "to revert to your unattractive correspondent."

Edgar gave a short laugh. He turned upon his friend in rebuke.

"He's never been far away from your thoughts. I've

felt him there the whole evening. You have two or three facts—that he's antipathetic to me, that he's in a financial difficulty, and that he's written me a letter. That ought to be enough for you."

"Financial difficulty. H'm . . . yes. . . ." Gaythorpe reflected. "He wants a loan, presumably. A substantial loan?"

"No, he doesn't want a loan."

"Advice." Gaythorpe was inquisitively silent. "I'm interested in him, you know."

"You're worse. You're inquisitive." Both smiled with a kind of determination. Gaythorpe grunted, conning afresh the points of his information.

"As you know," he presently resumed, "my interest is largely in you. It's by way of being paternal. Before this evening I should have said that you were a bit on the hard side. But there's nothing a sentimental idealist might not do; and I see now that you're a sentimental idealist. I'm filled with fear. I see you Quixotically ruining your family for the sake of self-mortification. You want to help this man because you dislike him. I tell you what's the matter with you, Edgar. Your particular kind of egotism leads you to make a fetish of magnanimity."

"Oh!" laughed Edgar.

"It isn't cowardice. It's indifference. The only thing that will save you is to fall deeply in love with Miss Flyaway. She will tempt you to imprudence, perhaps; but she will vitalise you, and harden you."

"If you remember, she was to marry me only when she was reformed," parried Edgar. "You seem to have forgotten that."

"On the contrary, you misjudge me. Any man, marrying the most reformed character, will find that he has

domesticated a tigress," replied Gaythorpe. "Marriage is an illuminating experiment. And now to revert to your unsympathetic correspondent. . . ."

v

They parted well before midnight, Gaythorpe to travel by taxicab to Waterloo and thence to his home at Hindhead, and Edgar to walk home through the deserted streets. Gaythorpe went his way still ignorant of the identity of Edgar's correspondent; but by his adroit questioning he had increased Edgar's preoccupation with the subject of that letter. It had been a perfectly simple letter, containing an account of various Stock-buying experiments which had come to disaster, a list of securities held, a statement of immediate need, and a request for advice. The writer of the letter had need of several thousand pounds, and if he were to sell the stock he held it would involve him in still further loss. Therefore, although Edgar had been technically truthful in saying that there had been no request for a loan, he had no doubt at all that the fitting reply to the letter would be an offer of assistance.


But why a bank had not been asked to advance money on the securities, which would have been the normal course to adopt, Edgar did not understand. Had the writer been a close personal friend, he could have seen the whole thing clearly, and his offer would have been immediate. But the letter was from Monty Rosenberg. Edgar was deeply perplexed. What was Monty's object in applying to him? That there must be some definite object he did not question. He could not suppose that Monty ever did anything without purpose; and in addition, he felt sure that Monty was a man to conceal from his acquaintances any hint that he was embarrassed.

Something, Edgar felt sure, was afoot. He walked home in a brown study.

Only once did he smile; and that was when he recollected Gaythorpe's curiosity. Gaythorpe, he remembered, had been curious not only about Monty, but also about the hypothetical attractive person whom it would have been a pleasure to help. Strange that he should have made so much of this point. Working, Edgar supposed, from the words "young and attractive," Gaythorpe had taken it for granted that this person was a woman—no doubt the fly-away girl who was to marry Edgar against his will. For an instant it seemed that Gaythorpe must have been hinting at some story, because in general he was not one of those arch sentimentalists who wink and curvet about the subject of marriage. Edgar gave a little laughing grunt as he walked.

"Silly old man," he thought. "I wonder what put all that nonsense into his head."

Perhaps Edgar was not quite as candid with himself as he should have been and as he generally was. He strode at a rapid pace along the ringing pavements; and the fresh wind that met him came deliciously cordial to his cheeks and lungs. Although he was not tall—about five feet eight—Edgar was sturdily built, and he loved walking. And in London the night hours are the best for that exercise. He was refreshed and invigorated. By the time he was half way down the Brompton Road Edgar had dismissed the subjects of Monty and the unknown from his mind; and thereafter all his thoughts were of business affairs until he reached home. All of them? Very nearly all. Some few, perhaps, he spared for Patricia; but he hardly was conscious when he thought of her, so familiar was he with the subject.



It was not until he was indoors, and sitting rather moodily by a waning fire, that Edgar returned to some of Gaythorpe's remarks. He did this in an instinctive effort to explain the moodiness of which he felt suddenly conscious. True, he had felt moments of melancholy while abroad; but those had been explicable by the fact that he was friendless in strange cities. Now the case was different. Somewhere within his heart there was an almost bitter resentment of Gaythorpe's cynicism on the subjects of women and marriage. At the moment he had accepted them as he would normally have done. They returned with added venom to his memory. The first thought—that perhaps Gaythorpe had been unhappy in his marriage—Edgar dismissed as sentimentality. The truer explanation was probably that the old man was expressing a fundamental cynicism, due to the fact that his own happiness had left him occasion to view the miseries of others. Edgar, too, had witnessed those miseries. He was still unable to explain them except in individual cases. He was thoughtful and none too happy. There had been menace—the deeper because he had concluded it to be unconscious—in Gaythorpe's insistence on the reality of a young woman towards whom Edgar felt a helpful eagerness.

"What a fool I was to give him such an opening!" he thought.

Slowly it was as though Edgar fell asleep. He saw two clear eyes, which he thought to hold all the truth and beauty in the world. He heard spoken words—words that were almost all that Patricia had ever said to him. The sense of her presence was extraordinarily strong . . . a presence that was more than presence, for Edgar was quite poignantly imagining a real Patricia,

so much more beautiful than she would seem with others present. His lips moved in unspoken words. His hands were gently raised from the arms of his chair, and extended. If desire and imagination had the power to call those we love to our sides, then surely Edgar would have awakened with Patricia in his arms. He was experiencing a reality of communion which only those who love deeply can conceive. The emotion he then felt transcended anything he had ever known.

And then his eyes opened, and he saw the extended arms with something like shame. The lips so lately parted were again firmly set, and he coloured faintly. Not thus was a woman to be won, he knew. And yet the vision had served to make his heart clear to him. He had seen Patricia as she had been at their first meeting, in all the smoke and din and brilliance of Monty's party. Again he had glimpsed Dalrymple and Monty; again he had exchanged with Harry Greenlees that measuring glance. He rose from the chair, and went across to the fireplace, his face lighted by a sudden flicker of flame. Now he knew why he had been so sensitive to Gaythorpe's allusions and his bitterness. Now, too, he realised what had been hidden from him. Never would he have been divided by the sharp impulse to strike or to kiss Patricia if she had not been the only person in the world capable of causing him pain. He loved deeply.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CHANGE

i

THE following evening Edgar found on reaching home that some old friends of his parents had so protracted an afternoon call that they had been asked to stay for dinner. Both were old ladies from a small country town, of substantial wealth and position, whose perspective had become grotesque as the result of long life in a restricted circle; and as companions Edgar found them insupportable. The airs of the schoolmistress, the independence of the housemaids, and the general superiority of the Misses Wickford to the whole of their world were incessantly discussed; and all these topics combined to make Edgar restlessly unhappy throughout the meal. Claudia was absent, at the home of friends; and he had neither solace nor variety. Because of this trouble Edgar decided upon a plan which was already half-formed in his mind. It was to run up and see Monty Rosenberg, and thus to learn the truth about Monty's financial straits and to discover the real nature of the help which Monty required from him.

Having correctly taken leave of the Misses Wickford, who thereupon discussed his bachelor state with those who remained and advanced the claims of a really nice girl living in their district, Edgar was quickly upon the road. Within half-an-hour he was at Monty's door. He had not made up his mind what to say; but he had Monty's letter in his pocket, and was ready to be helpful and businesslike. And as the door was opened Edgar heard such a din that he recoiled. From the studio

was a huge and brazen noise, as of kettles and fire-irons in competition with piano and banjo.

"Oh," he cried, electrically reconsidering his plan for the evening. "A party?" Coming as he had done with the object of advising a man financially embarrassed, Edgar felt as Mother Hubbard must have done when she found her dog dancing. He hesitated, quick comments darting through his mind. This was not the suitable setting for a financial talk. Was Monty mad? His recoil subsided. After all, Nero fiddled . . . "Then perhaps I'd better——"

But the door of the studio had opened, shedding fresh light and redoubled din from within; and Monty was already aware of his arrival. The shutting of the door made the noise comparatively negligible again. Monty hastened forward.

"Hullo, Mayne. I'm glad to see you. Don't go. Come in here." He indicated the big drawing room to the left of the hall. It was empty, but a fire was alight there, and the room was warm. From the amber walls and rich golden brown of the furnishings the soft illumination evoked glowing beauty. "It's just a few people dancing. Are you a dancing man?"

Edgar explained the object of his visit. He was all the time acutely conscious of the room and its air of impenetrable richness, contrasting it without being aware that he did so with the less exquisite plainness of his own home, which represented so much more love and enterprise and so much less finished taste. It stiffened him a little.

"That had better be postponed," he said. "We can't discuss it now."

"I'd like to. Come and dance—and then we'll talk later on."

Monty's manner was cordial—friendly; and yet Ed-

gar felt that it held perhaps a slight uneasiness. The beautifully-groomed air which always masked Monty was unchanged; but in those dark eyes and behind the assured manner lay something that was almost an appeal. Edgar shrank; but he accepted the invitation, and he was led into the studio.

ii

It had been cleared so as to provide ample floor-space for the guests. At the piano sat one man and by his side another who played upon a banjo. Both were in evening dress. A sportive young fellow had been adding to the noise by clashing tongs and fire-shovel together. About twenty people were in the studio altogether, of whom only a few of the men wore dinner jackets; and the dancing had not long been in progress. It was not yet a rowdy party, although it might later develop into one when the character of the music and the stimulation of the common movement should have had their effect. The studio walls rose high above the moving figures; and the place was quite different from what it had been when Edgar had seen it before. All that æsthetic blending of colour which he had noticed was now reduced. It was a large bare place, the chairs and divans withdrawn to the walls, and the decoration subdued. Hangings and rugs were gone: the walls were adorned only with casually hung or pinned sketches. The place seemed lighter and more airy, but it was wholly out of key with Edgar's recollection. Nor were the guests recognisable to him in that first glimpse. Edgar smiled as he turned aside to Monty, and then he heard the music cease. There came a babble from all round him. It was now that Edgar's heart gave a slight stir, for he saw that Patricia, who sat with her late partner at the farther

end of the studio, was looking in his direction. She wore a plain dark dress which emphasised her fairness and the whiteness of her skin; but he could not tell at that distance of what material the dress was made nor how Patricia looked, so strong was the light. Instantly Edgar was delighted that he had come. He felt nothing more intense than delight—nothing more possessive; but he was engrossed, and could hardly attend to what Monty was saying.

"I'll introduce you to one or two of the girls. The others won't interest you. And we'll get away presently and have a talk. That suit you?"

Again Edgar was aware of that appeal. It revived his sense of stiffness, for he could never have pleaded for himself as this man was doing. In distaste for Monty's suppleness, Edgar found also something which gave him sudden personal interest in the man. He saw him very truly in that instant, in a quick glimpse. Monty was without pride. Therefore he was to be watched. Not merely treachery might arise, but insensitiveness, which upsets standards by unconsciousness that they exist. It was with a faint shrug that Edgar turned to be introduced to Rhoda Flower. Strange how instinctively contemptuous of suppleness an Englishman often is! Edgar did not underrate Monty; but he despised him. Deep down, far below his awareness of judgment, lay the snorting epithet "Foreigner!" All his experience of life and his tolerance of moral defects could not annul that instinctive hostility to alien civilisation. Even while he was dancing with Rhoda, he was preoccupied with other perceptions. He did not speak; he hardly felt her there; but mechanically followed the rhythm of the dance.

Something awakened him. He could not dance with Rhoda without recognising her as a voluptuary; and he

was interested in her from the knowledge that Rhoda's personality was, in spite of its mobility, surprisingly fixed for so young a girl as he supposed her to be. He looked sharply at his partner—at her black bobbed hair and her beautifully clear cheeks and eyes. There was something vaguely familiar about her face, and about the life which gave it constant vivacity of expression.

"I've seen you before, haven't I?" he said, frowning in the effort to remember.

"How clever of you!" cried Rhoda. A slow and delicious smile drew her lips apart, and revealed teeth yet whiter. In the plump but beautifully-moulded cheeks appeared dimples. Rhoda was languorously arch. "I wish I was clever."

"Have you seen me before?" demanded Edgar. He could not resist the attraction to her, and he was smiling responsively; but he was still puzzled, thinking her face so familiar and yet so unfamiliar.

"How gallant you are!" teased Rhoda. "Isn't this a good time?"

"Were you here at a party about six weeks ago?"

Rhoda laughed outright. Patricia, at that moment passing, opened her eyes wide. She had not hitherto recognised Edgar as a wit, and she took a peculiar interest in Rhoda Flower, so that her observation in this instance was made the more alert.

His doubts resolved, Edgar was at ease with Rhoda. He now recognised her as the girl who had been with Harry Greenlees at the first party, and who had left in his company at the end of the evening. He remembered her air of attentiveness to the young man who smiled so broadly. It was pleasant to recall this picture, because it was related to his first sight of Patricia. He looked round for Harry, who, however, was not present. Nor could he see Blanche Tallentyre; but some of the

other faces were those of guests at the earlier gathering. The majority were unknown to him, and while their spirits seemed to be good, Edgar thought the company as a whole was a little inclined to be rakish. He was glad to be dancing with Rhoda, who, apart from Patricia, was the freshest among the girls. The men struck him as a poor lot. Now that he was used to the band Edgar no longer found it deafening. He was only a moderately-good dancer, because although he had a good ear and sufficient physical elasticity he was not especially interested in the exercise; but he could tell that his partner was both accurate and enthusiastic. She moved beautifully, with complete absorption in the dance. Moreover, he found her impudent cheerfulness delightful. He would have preferred only one other companion; and it was to this other that his glance flew whenever she was near. The flying glimpse was all Edgar had for a long time, for Rhoda was busily engaged during intervals between dances in trying to learn something about him by means of adroit questioning, while Patricia herself seemed to be quite content with her partners and to be elated by their obvious admiration.

Edgar was happy in Patricia's presence. He did not feel any immediate need to speak to her, and he was in some curious way too shy to wrest her from these other men. But into his glances there came presently a slightly anxious gravity, for he noticed differences in her, wrought by the month during which he had been absent from London, and these differences were unwelcome. An eye less keen would not have discerned them: Edgar himself could not have said wherein they were shown. At last, when Rhoda was momentarily engaged with somebody else, he went across the room to Patricia's side.

iii

Even in her greeting he found Patricia changed, yet he was at the same time puzzled at his sense of the change. She was as unaffected as ever, and almost as fresh. Ah! almost—that was the difference he felt. It was a restlessness in her expression that made Edgar frown, a strain in the eyes, a small and perhaps momentary diminution in the bloom of her cheek. To another there would have seemed no change at all.

"I saw you as soon as I arrived," Edgar said; "but you seemed to have partners for each dance. I've been abroad for a month."

"I wish I had been," answered Patricia.

Again the mark of slight change! And a leaping impulse in Edgar to respond that she had but to be constant in such a wish to make him altogether happy.

"It wasn't really very cheerful," he assured her. "I was very lonely."

"But you were *doing* something the whole time."

"And what have you been doing? Amusing yourself?"

"Trying to. Oh, yes . . . I suppose so." Patricia was listless and unresponsive. Her vivacity had died down. He was seeing her in a moment of discouragement. But even as Edgar received this impression, she brightened, and went on: "That man there—" she indicated a medium-sized man of about thirty, who was describing something to a companion and raising his hands with a grace which suggested that he was not English—"That one . . . dances better than anybody I've ever met. If I could dance as well as he does I should be happy."

"Is he happy?" asked Edgar. "I thought you looked

as though you were happy and as though you danced about as well as anybody could."

She shook her head.

"What did you see abroad?" she demanded.

"Poverty and glitter; cabs in the streets and jewels at the opera; and everybody wondering how on earth to make both ends meet. Money that didn't buy what it ought to buy. Plenty of misery going on in each corner, and plenty of noise and fuss. The same old contradictions everywhere."

Patricia frowned.

"Worse than here?"

"I couldn't tell. I was busy, and depressed. The men I met were wretched; and I saw the gaiety only in passing. Very much the same, I expect."

"Hm." She made no comment; but she had become grave. "D'you think everybody's mad? I do."

"Perhaps they always are. Perhaps we are."

"Sometimes I feel I shall *go* mad." There was a discouraged note in Patricia's voice which confirmed Edgar's intuition. She was obviously not in a normal mood; although he had seen her laughing with her partners earlier in the evening.

"Let's dance," he suggested. "Postpone the madness."

"I think," said Patricia, slowly, and as if she were being strangled by some unexpressed emotion, "that . . . you're only afraid because . . . you think I'm a child to be petted out of . . ."

She allowed him to make her dance; but she did not respond to him, and there were tears in Patricia's eyes. Edgar did not speak while they danced. Almost, he did not look at her. He was too much disconcerted, too preoccupied with an effort to explain Patricia's mood. Yet to Patricia he appeared immovable.

iv

Once during their partnership Edgar was conscious of a long deep glance from her. When at last he looked to meet it the glance was withdrawn, but the gravity of Patricia's face was unchanged. He, too, frowned, made thoughtful by her expression; and when they were once more seated together, since he felt that their degree of intimacy was not great enough for an invited confidence, he tried to divert her attention from her own thoughts.

"You remember that before I went away you promised to come and make the acquaintance of Claudia?" he said. "What would you say to coming one evening this week? Would that be possible?"

"I'm not sure," said Patricia, coldly. "I'm rather busy this week."

The devil you are! thought Edgar. He grew equally cold for an instant, until his patience conquered his irritation.

"I'll ask my mother to write and suggest an evening," he went on, as if unconcernedly. "You could come to dinner, and you could meet Claudia. Also Pulcinella and Percy."

Patricia inclined her head; she was not listening. A moment later she was claimed by the dancer for whom she had expressed admiration; and Edgar saw her moving about the room as if she were entirely happy. He was bewildered. Was it to himself that she had become hostile? His impulse was to withdraw, to see her no more; but dudgeon is a preserve of the very young man, so he dismissed it. Nevertheless he was resentful of her listlessness in his own company, her inattention. What could account for it?

While Edgar sat thus absorbed in a single problem,

he found that Monty had drawn near. Monty made a motion towards the door.

"Could you come now?" he asked. The two men left the studio and went into the room to which Edgar had first been introduced on arrival.

v

As the door was closed Edgar could not forbear the comment which had been in his mind from the moment of discovery that a party was in progress.

"I thought from your letter that you were in some urgent difficulty," he said.

Monty was quite suave. He stood before his companion with the utmost nonchalance, a faint smile upon his lips.

"Do sit down," he answered, in that gentle voice with the rising note. "I *am* in a difficulty, and it's most kind of you to . . . give me your advice. Now, in detail that is quite impossible this evening. This . . . this affair prevents my being away long. But perhaps if I tell you a little more the whole matter will be . . . plainer." When Edgar was settled, Monty supported himself by the table, and continued. "Well, now . . . as I told you, there's about twenty thousand invested in those different . . . concerns. In every case the prices are seriously down. Most of them will go up again."

"Quite," agreed Edgar.

"Normally, then, I should hang on. And of course I could borrow from the bank."

"I wondered why you hadn't done that."

Monty lowered his voice still further, until the thick vibration which underlay its ordinary softness was emphasised. Edgar had the sense that Monty always spoke of business in this lazy and confidential way, that he

had the large loose meanness of those born opulent, that even in dealing with himself Monty was conscious of a sort of explanatory patience.

"I don't want to go to the bank for a reason which . . . I wonder if you'll appreciate its strength . . . because . . . well, the local manager is . . . an acquaintance . . . a very social man . . . rather indiscreet; and his wife might possibly be more indiscreet; and I'm a little morbid about . . ."

"Do they—I understand perfectly. Do you keep your securities at the bank, or do you keep them yourself?"

"At the bank. That's the trouble. I can get them, of course. I could transfer them from this branch and deposit them elsewhere without question or inconvenience; but I have a very definite personal reason for making no change at all in my present allocations. And, my dear Mayne, the money I need is . . . I need hardly say, this is in great confidence. . . . The money I need will have to be paid quickly, and . . . in fact, the whole thing is difficult."

"What's the sum?"

"Two-thousand five-hundred. You understand, I don't . . ."

"Who are your bankers? Could it be done with the Head Office? No, I suppose not."

"Not . . . Look here, Mayne, I don't want to be mysterious at all . . ."

"No: that's quite all right. I'm only thinking . . ."

"It's the Great Central Bank, just up here. I particularly don't want to do anything whatever in relation to the bank. But for that I shouldn't have troubled you. I want to raise the money outside. I don't want to alter my deposits. Let me make that perfectly clear."

Edgar interrupted him.

"You'd like me to suggest lending you the money myself?" he asked directly.

There was a moment's pause—as if for the passage of a shiver of distaste for such brusque ill-breeding. Then Monty, as if nothing in the world could have ruffled him, nodded slowly.

"That would be most kind," he replied. "*Most* kind."

"I wonder how long it would be for?" pondered Edgar, aloud.

"Five hundred in a month's time. The whole of the rest within six months. That I think I could promise definitely. Could you do it yourself without inconvenience? You're most generous."

I wonder if I'm generous? thought Edgar, recalling Gaythorpe's jeer at his morbidity. And secretly he knew that it was not generosity but a sort of contempt which had prompted his leading question, and that Monty himself, placed similarly, would have avoided the issue and evaded the loan.

"Well, I'm not a money-lender; and it's quite true that the thing presents difficulties. But I could certainly arrange to let you have the money."

"My dear Mayne . . ."

"Not at all. When do you want it? And how?" He was impatient.

Monty shrugged. His orientalism was more marked than ever.

"This instant," he admitted. "Or . . . as soon as possible." Edgar nodded. "And I should like it," continued Monty, with his singular smile, "I should like it—if that happened quite perfectly to suit you—as an open cheque, payable to bearer . . ."

"Oh!" cried Edgar, as if in surprise.

"I'm perfectly ready to sign any acknowledgment," insisted Monty. "But this will be of peculiar service." There was a silence between them. The cheque was to be open, and the matter was pressing: therefore the payment was to be a secret payment. If Monty's investments were as he stated them to be, and his relations with the bank and its branch manager amicable, what purpose was there in such concealment? Edgar frowned slightly. He was being used as a friend—as a convenience—by one who was not his friend and who did not trust him with an explanation. As if he felt what was in Edgar's mind, Monty interrupted. "I feel I *must* emphasise the point that my reason for wanting this money privately is personal, and not financial," he said.

A sudden smile lighted Edgar's face.

"I perfectly understand that," he answered. "There's no more to be said."

Together the two men went back to the studio. In two minutes they had so mingled with the noise and rising spirits of the dancers that their absence, if it had been noticed at all, was forgotten. Edgar sought Rhoda Flower, and was amused to find her interest in himself shown without concealment. But even as he talked to her he was from time to time seeking in that crowd for Patricia, and seeking among his impressions for something which would explain the change in her. As far as Edgar could tell, Patricia did not concern herself at all with him. It was strange how this wound that she had inflicted outstayed every other sensation of the evening—from his pleasure in Rhoda to his growing antipathy towards Monty. He was puzzled and chagrined.

CHAPTER TWELVE: ENCOUNTER

i

PATRICIA arrived at the Maynes' house a moment early. She had walked from her rooms through one of the streets to the north of the King's Road, and in spite of her new boredom, which made her a little shrink from the prospect of an evening with uncongenial people, she was aware of curiosity at sight of the house. It was one of those tall featureless houses which lie in respectable avenues in Kensington, stained by a kind of grim insipidity and separated from the road by an iron railing, a grass plot, and an immense flight of stone steps. The portals were massively columnar, and the windows bay. There was nothing to make the Maynes' house different from those upon each side of it excepting the number and the fact that the iron gate did not groan as it was opened. From without, the house was what Patricia expected.

Indoors it was distinct. There was no smell of cooking; the walls were papered in a blue-gray, the staircase was fresh and clean with blue-grey paint, and a carpet of the same colour in a rather darker shade extended as far as she could see. Her mind instantly received the impression: "Liberty!" The maid was young, pretty, smiling, and curious. And as Patricia went forward into the room into which she was informally shown Edgar himself was there, with a plump old lady and a pretty young woman and a surreptitiously barking immature cocker spaniel all close behind him. Patricia received a shock. This was a home, the first home she

had been in for years. These were kind people. Her heart was opened to them. She was a child at once, eager that they should like her and be her friends. How strange it was, when she had dreaded something alarming and something boring. She was hardly conscious that they looked at her with keen eyes and brains, so definitely did she feel herself greeted by warm hearts. She was for an instant deeply moved.

"My mother, Claudia, Pulcinella . . ." said Edgar, with a minimum of awkwardness.

There were two warm hand-clasps, and a glance, ever so rapid, at Claudia; and Patricia saw the little dog's tail twisting, and stooped to pat the glossy body which was being shyly insinuated into her notice by its agreeable owner. In the firelight and gaslight there was cheerfulness, but there was peace also, and it was the tranquillity—the homely quality of peace—that Patricia first noticed. She saw it for a moment only; and then Claudia led the way up to a bedroom in which she could remove her cloak and hat, and smooth her hair, and if necessary, powder her face before dinner. But Patricia had no need to powder her face, and so the two girls had no opportunity for any prolonged mutual scrutiny by means of the mirror. They were shy of each other, and hardly spoke together until their return to the drawing-room. It was then that Patricia, sitting down, first properly glimpsed the Mayne household, which by now had been brought to full strength by the arrival of old Mr. Mayne and a sedate cat whose name was Percy.

Mr. Mayne was a man of over sixty, small and thin, with a fierce aspect and a ridiculously mild voice. He had a moustache and beard resembling the pictures Patricia had seen of pirates. His eyes were commanding. Only his voice was inappropriate. It was a clear deep voice, but it lacked volume; and in face of such a terri-

fyng presence it came as the bleat of the kid from the mouth of the jaguar. His wife was equally gentle, but she looked placid, and in Mrs. Mayne there were no sharp contrasts. She was round, plump, and cheerful, the sort of a woman upon whose lap a ball of wool refuses to stay, especially when there is a little dog at hand. Very different from these were the two children. For Edgar Patricia was conscious of an increasing sense of respect. She now saw that his quietness had its quality and interest. His rather grave face, with its general air of brownness, was not one which attracted her; but he looked well-built, and her friendliness towards him would have been perfect if she had not felt one very singular thing about Edgar. It was that he went his own way. With great considerateness of others, she was sure, but quite inhumanly, he went his own way. Patricia felt that if he decided to do a thing an effort beyond her own power would be needed to turn him from his object. She had made up her mind that he was not subject to human weaknesses, and she resented the aloofness created by this freedom.

Claudia was different again, but not equally disconcerting. She was tall, and noticeably pretty, with a very occasional immaturity of gesture which indicated her youthfulness. Dark, and a little like her brother, she had a gaiety of demeanour and a sparkling air of enthusiasm which his temperament forbade. To Patricia there was something irresistibly charming and wise about Claudia. That she also went her own way, if such was the case, caused in Claudia's case no barrier between them. It was natural and right that Claudia, being a modern young woman, should go her own way. Patricia went her own way. She thought of Claudia: "She's prettier than I am, but her figure isn't as good. Nor's her taste. She doesn't dress as well as I do.

She's very clever and kind and nice. I like her. Of course, not as clever or as nice as I am. But then I'm . . ."

It was extremely pleasant to be in a comfortable home which really was a home, and to be in the company of such born friends as the Maynes. Patricia sighed with content.

ii

She had not noticed Percy, who had entered the room during her absence; and Percy, who had been washing his face, had not noticed Patricia. When he discovered that a stranger was in the room Percy was slightly annoyed. He did not like strangers. It had taken him some weeks to grow used to Pulcinella and even now he sometimes spat at the little dog, for Percy had been for three years the dominating force in this house. When Percy wished to leave or to enter a room he gave a single blood-curdling deep miaow; when he thought the time had come for him to be nursed he took his welcome for granted; when he shook off the years and demanded a game they were all at his service. Although Pulcinella was insistently lively, no real romp ever occurred in which Percy was not the leader. Even Pulcinella, who barked and bounded in the effort to produce a mock-battle, was afraid of Percy; and the human beings were not so much afraid as respectful and affectionate towards him. Percy therefore disliked strangers, who disturbed his sense of what was proper. Pausing in the act of licking delicately extended fingers, he stared rudely at Patricia. He decided to watch her for a few moments before making up his mind as to her acceptability as a new acquaintance.

Patricia, quite unconscious of this important scrutiny, was allowing herself to be entertained by Percy's elders.

She did not see a big Persian cat, whose long hair was nearly as black as his dignified nose and whose tail, when paraded, was as large as an ostrich feather. She merely looked from the small face with bushy whiskers of Mr. Mayne to the beautiful soft complexion of Mrs. Mayne, and again to the exuberantly expressive eyes and lips of Claudia. She liked Claudia better and better each minute. She did not look at all at Edgar, in whom she was conscious of feeling no true interest whatever.

"Isn't it very lonely for you to live alone, Miss Quin?" Mrs. Mayne was asking. She did not wait for an answer; but continued: "I've never lived alone, so I don't know what it's like; but I should have thought it likely to make a young girl miserable. Yet I know, of course, that one sometimes wishes very much to be alone with one's thoughts. As a *holiday* it must be very pleasant. . . ." It was the quiet voice of a contented woman that meandered slowly and almost prattlingly among words that came without effort.

"Think of the liberty, mother!" exclaimed Claudia. "Not always having other people to consider. Not always having somebody to say she isn't ladylike."

"I like it," said Patricia. "And I'm not at all ladylike."

"Perhaps you're not much alone?" suggested Claudia.

"Oh, yes. All day. But I'm generally out in the evenings."

"Claudia always speaks as though I were a fault-finding mother; but it isn't true, and I don't think she means it altogether. I should be sorry to think I was a fault-finder," ruminated Mrs. Mayne.

"You're a darling," Claudia declared. "But, like most mothers, you live in the past. You don't feel that you're grown up and that you don't understand this generation. That's what I complain of." She turned

to Patricia. "This is a very difficult household. Father doesn't care two straws about anything that goes on outside the house, except the things that are put into newspapers. He *would* write letters to the papers, only he prides himself on never having written to the papers. He's conceited about it. That's what saves us endless humiliation. Mother thinks the world's a very distressing place, and the latest sort of girls very top-heavy and reckless and . . ."

"I don't think they're very happy," urged Mrs. Mayne.

"Perhaps they're not. All the better. Perhaps something will come of it—unless they enjoy their unhappiness too much, as some of them do. She doesn't understand that there have been *changes* since she was a girl."

"Only too well." Mrs. Mayne showed spirit.

"Well, she doesn't sympathise with them. She doesn't realise her standards don't apply to to-day. She's absolutely——"

"I'm sure I'm very faulty," agreed Mrs. Mayne, almost approvingly. Edgar laughed at his mother's unquenchable power to discomfit Claudia, and the two exchanged a glance.

"As for Edgar," proceeded Claudia, "he's quite hopeless. I bring friends here, and he thinks they're awful. So they are—he's quite right. But I shouldn't know they were awful if he didn't point it out. That's the disastrous consequences of bringing people here. Edgar says nothing about them at all, and so he stimulates *my* corrosive faculty. He'll drive me to having surreptitious friends."

Patricia's nose was a little in the air.

"I don't think he's very human," she said.

"You see?" Claudia looked in triumph at her brother. To Patricia, she continued. "The trouble about him is, he's a *good* man. He's old-fashioned. He has princi-

ples. It's a nuisance when a man has principles. He was brought up to think it was the thing to be decent and honourable, and so on. He doesn't live in our age at all, when everybody's trying hard to be wicked and only half-succeeding."

"I know," agreed Patricia, relishing the irony but perceiving the truth of her new friend's analysis. "I think it's impossible for one generation to understand the next."

"Exactly. But the next can understand the one—like winking."

"I'm sure I'm very easy to understand," said Mrs. Mayne. "Edgar isn't. I've never understood him. Or, for that matter, Claudia, although she's my own daughter."

"You know too much *about* me to understand me, mother," cried Claudia. "That's true, isn't it, Edgar? Too many things, I mean."

"It's certainly ingenious," agreed Edgar, quietly. He had hitherto been listening in silence to the debate, although all had been aware of his presence.

"What nonsense!" cried Mrs. Mayne.

Patricia thought: How nice and silly they are with each other! Her spirits rose yet higher. She felt that here the talk was the kind of talk—nonsensical and yet true—that she liked above every other kind. It was clear and light, without strain and without stereotyped slang. After so much that was quite otherwise, that aped smartness and achieved only repetition, this chatter gave her ease of heart as nothing else could have done. She smiled upon them all, impulsively, so that Edgar turned away to hide his passionate relief.

iii

"Dinner is served, ma'am," said the pretty maid, at the door. They all moved forward, leaving Percy at his toilet and losing Pulcinella *en route*.

Patricia, leading the way with Mrs. Mayne, saw the dining room with a friendly and interested eye; and as the chairs and sideboard were all of old mahogany, she supposed herself to be amid the relics of Mr. and Mrs. Mayne's early married life. The room was large and lofty, and the mahogany furniture suited it, so much did the shape and arrangement of everything accord. It was very different from the drawing room, where the note had been a light grey, with loose covers of flowered chintz upon the more comfortable seats and curtains of a shade warmer than that which otherwise prevailed. Here in the dining room the curtains were dark and the gas-shades mellow in tone. Everything was subdued. It was an "old" room, not at all what she would have expected from her quick imagination of Claudia's taste. Well, that was a puzzle the more. Involuntarily she shook her head. In this house the older people counted more heavily than she could have expected. The younger ones were not all-powerful. She guessed that the drawing room represented the farthest concession Mrs. Mayne would make to modernity; and it was already fifteen years out of date. She did not realise that it heralded the coming revival of Liberty in house-decoration.

Her insight was gone as quickly as it had come. Patricia hardly knew what had been her impression, so much less apt was she in thought than in intuitive knowledge. She was still charmed; but she knew that Mrs. Mayne also was in the habit of going her own way. It was a family habit. Patricia could not restrain a half-glance

at the whiskered Mr. Mayne, who sat with such benignant fierceness at the head of the table. Was his pictorial ferocity merely a compensation? Or was his mildness the serenity of a dictator? Perhaps even Mr. Mayne . . . She was deeply and childishly impressed. For an instant her self-assurance trembled. Patricia, of course, was unquestionably Patricia and in that respect unique; but could there possibly be other people—other real people—than Patricia in the world? It had seemed in that very uncomfortable instant as though there might be four others. With something like panic, she raised her spoon from the table.

iv

"What I should like to do," explained Claudia, "would be to re-shuffle the world a little. I could do it so nicely. I'd separate people under forty and people over forty. They could meet, and talk, and the people over forty wouldn't be made to feel they were quite useless; but they shouldn't have any power over the younger ones."

"It would be a splendid idea." Patricia was eagerly responsive.

"For a month," agreed Mrs. Mayne, with her natural irony.

"For always," firmly insisted Claudia. "Oh, you'd see a change."

"Forty in *years?*" asked Edgar. "Isn't that rather arbitrary?"

"I didn't mean I'd destroy them. Only separate them."

Edgar laughed a little.

"I believe you'd have a reactionary 'left' even then," he said, agreeably. "And a revolutionary 'right,' too. And another thing, Claudia . . . you don't take into ac-

count the fact that some quite young people are obscurantist. When you think of young people you always think of yourself. Never of Johnny Rix or Daphne Petton. . . ."

"Oh, but they're *awful*! I'd expose them at birth!" declared Claudia.

Edgar was unconvinced. He shook his head.

"You can't be everywhere at once," he warned.

"Well, there's Miss Quin . . ."

"Two of you—against a multitude."

"You're *hopelessly* cynical, Edgar. Miss Quin, he's a Pyrrhonist, I find."

"Good gracious!" Patricia was astounded. "What's that?"

"Nothing. Simply nothing at all."

"Inhuman?" asked Patricia, hopefully.

"Perfectly. I forget whether it comes from a man or a place; but he doesn't believe in anything at all. It's a ghastly state of mind to be in."

"Really, Claudia; you're *too* sweeping," protested Mrs. Mayne. "Anybody would think Edgar wasn't the kindest and best——"

"Oh, *ever* so good. Good unbelievably. Kind . . . Frightfully interested in the insect world of human beings. Considerate—as few men are considerate—to the poor creatures who live around him."

"And very tolerant of Claudia," pursued Mrs. Mayne, turning to Patricia. "Oh, dear, this fish is over-cooked, Rachel, and I particularly . . . However, it's no good grumbling. . . . I hope you'll like it, my dear. We have a very good fishmonger, and a very good cook, too; but . . . Edgar, I wish you'd speak for yourself. Claudia will give Miss Quin such a peculiar . . ."

"He doesn't care . . ." Claudia looked across at her brother. "Do you?"

Patricia could tell that he did not care. He was quite unconcerned. A slight grimness came into her expression. She wished him less unconcerned. She would have liked to believe in Edgar's susceptibility to pain. As it was, he seemed invulnerable. Patricia turned once more to Claudia with great sympathy and friendliness.

"I think your idea's very attractive," she said. "About the division."

Mr. Mayne gave a short, rather sardonic laugh.

"Wine's corked," he remarked. "Take it away, Rachel. And bring another bottle. With the chill off. Properly. Not roasted. . . ."

Patricia lost her head. A tremulous twitching seized the corners of her mouth. She tried to control herself, and became desperate in the effort. In another instant she felt that she must giggle. Fortunately there came a diversion which saved her.

"Miaow!" cried Percy, from outside the door.

"What a menagerie it is!" said Mr. Mayne, in a savage tone. "It's incredible! Let him in, let him in! Of course, it's the fish. I never knew a cat . . ." His voice, even in this protest, was very low. He spoke as hushedly as a man telling a tale of horror.

It was then that Patricia saw that behind his ferocious air Mr. Mayne could hardly restrain his own ridiculous laughter. She looked swiftly round the table, from one to the other, from Edgar, to whom her glance first went, to Claudia, at his side. All were smiling, as if good-naturedly and at something absurd. Uncontrollably she laughed a little, thankful to find that they were not even solemn. And as she did this Percy appeared. Patricia had a glimpse of brilliant eyes and a huge waving tail which stood high above Percy's body as he made a leisurely entrance.

V

"Do you go to the theatre much, Miss Quin? My husband and I sometimes go, but it always seems to me that it's only an excuse for going out to dinner and for dressing up and seeing crowds of expensively-dressed people who are enjoying the same experience. I'm really much happier at home with a book. Although the books nowadays don't seem to be as interesting as they were. They're not very amusing. Very clever, I suppose, telling us all about our thoughts—which I'm sure we never have—and about young men and girls who seem to me to be very disagreeable and morbid and get themselves into sad trouble about things that don't happen to any of our friends. Do you like them?"

"I'm never quite sure," admitted Patricia. "They *are* very clever, of course."

"I wonder if cleverness *is* a good thing. Is it, Edgar?"

"Very good thing, mother," said Edgar, obediently, as if he had been thinking of something else.

"He doesn't think so!" declared Claudia. "Nor do I. It's only self-consciousness."

Mrs. Mayne appeared to digest the information. Unchecked, she thoughtfully continued:

"People *are* self-conscious, of course. Even I notice that. Of course, I'm old; and so I take an interest in what *other* people are doing. But I don't think I was ever any different. I'm sure I'm not always thinking about myself or my own affairs, which is all that seems to engross most of the people Claudia brings to the house. They seem *rather* peculiar. I'm not always saying that the young ones don't understand me——"

"It wouldn't be true," interjected Claudia. "It would be absurd."

"I think it *might* be true. But we hear nothing at all from Claudia, from morning to night, but the great disadvantages of young people; and their wisdom, and foresight; and——"

"Mother!"

An extremely mischievous smile appeared upon Mrs. Mayne's face. With her white hair and clear complexion, and in her rather high-cut dress of amber-coloured silk, she looked, when she smiled, ageless. She was a match for her daughter. Behind that rambling speech was a brain as acute and as teasing in its workings as anything Claudia could show; and Mrs. Mayne had the advantage over Claudia that her ideas were inflexible, while her daughter's were undisciplined and often wholly undetermined. Claudia resumed:

"I think you ought to know, Miss Quin, that mother's very unscrupulous. I mean, you must have noticed it for yourself; but you're so nice that perhaps you may not have let yourself *think* it. Father and I are the only people in this house who are scrupulous. We're very just. Edgar's pretty awful. But mother's unscrupulousness passes all bounds. I *have* this evening said a few words about young people, but that's because of something Edgar was saying earlier in the evening. He said you were a young woman, as though that conveyed anything at all. He was asked to describe you; and he said *that*."

"Oh, more than that," interpolated Edgar. "Surely."

"That was the principal thing. I said: 'What sort of a young woman?' and mother admitted that 'young woman' sounded like a term of reproach. Which it certainly is. She *admitted* it."

Patricia looked across at Edgar with some resentment, but also with some pity. He was eating his dinner in

tranquillity, and Patricia felt a sudden suppression of anger in her breast.

"After all," she said, quietly. "He's a 'young man.' I don't know which is more of a term of reproach. We can't help our age or our sex. But for some reason women *cannot* get men to think of them as human beings. Always, they're regarded as women, and never as individuals."

"I think it's because men are rather new to the idea that they *are* individuals, and because women also are rather self-conscious about it. They haven't had an individual life for very long. Don't you think so, Miss Quin?"

Patricia, recovering a little from her enthusiasm, shook her head, smiling as if with greater wisdom.

"I think it's because women are simply rather conceited," remarked Edgar, in a surprised tone. "The temptation to conceited men is to take them down a peg."

A jerk seemed to shake Patricia. So that was what he thought! She understood now the reason of her lack of sympathy with him. He was indifferent. He cared for nothing but his own egotism. In that he resembled other men, no doubt; but in his case the offence took an extreme form. He did not appreciate Patricia Quin! He thought her conceited. He did not take her seriously. It was unpardonable, since it showed invincible stupidity. But what did it matter, after all? Patricia decided suddenly that she did not like him, that she had never liked him. When she looked at Edgar she could tell that such a man, so free from human weakness, and so incapable of appreciating anything which did not accord with his prejudices, would never be able to inspire real affection.

vi

After dinner a number of Claudia's friends came either unexpectedly or upon some casual invitation from Claudia. All were young men and women of refined tastes; and for a short time during their restless incursion there was a good deal of chatter. Patricia found herself not quite so much at home as she had been. She wished it had not been thought necessary—if that were indeed the case—for others to be invited. She felt so much older than Claudia's friends, so much superior to them in intelligence and knowledge of the world. They produced a superficial air of bustle and jollity; but it was all so naïve as to be tiresome and stupid. Claudia was different. She at least had brains and high spirits. She also had vitality. But the others were so many boys and girls, and not of the kind of boy and girl that Patricia had recently begun to find amusing. These had no spice of danger about them; and Patricia had developed of late a new craving for just this spice. The girls were good suburban girls; the boys good suburban boys. Not one of them seemed to have a lurking devil. Quickly the party became what Patricia had feared it would be. It became insipid. Mrs. Mayne, from even the teasing and mischievous old lady of the dinner, grew into such a woman as her placid appearance would have indicated. Edgar and his father both disappeared, the former to return after not more than half-an-hour, during which—as he supposed that Patricia would be amusingly employed—he had cleared off some arrears of work. If it had not been for Claudia, Patricia's spirits would deeply have been sunk into boredom.

But at last the evening took a turn. The visitors, having stayed an hour, went as suddenly as they had come. Supper brought her once more within the circle

of the Maynes; and she and Claudia and Edgar were at a table together. Edgar seemed preoccupied; but nothing could check Claudia's high spirits. She and her mother sparred with considerable spirit. Patricia delighted in the happy relationship. She found herself as the evening advanced recovering all the zest that she had lost on the coming of the juvenile visitors. Called upon to do so, she even gave her impressions of those who had called, and during this period she could not help glancing at Edgar to see whether he was amused at her comments. To her chagrin, Edgar remained serious. Although he smiled, his expression was grave. He was not attending. Patricia hardened. Such neglect chilled her, so unusual was it. Swiftly her resentment at his implied belief in her conceitedness returned and increased. It was not known to her that during his absence from the room Edgar had discovered something which had given him a great shock. She judged only by her own egocentric knowledge, and she accordingly misinterpreted his mood. Only to Edgar, therefore, was Patricia's manner at all cold. But he presently shook off whatever had been the matter which had made him thoughtful, and as he became animated Patricia was lured farther and farther from her grievance, until at last it was for the time altogether forgotten.

By then it was eleven o'clock, and the evening was ended. After warm exchanges of kind expressions between herself and Claudia, and after a further invitation from Mrs. Mayne, Patricia found herself walking through the dark streets by Edgar's side.

"I'm very glad I came," she told him naively. "I think Claudia's splendid."

"You were rather afraid, weren't you?" Edgar asked.

"I'm always afraid of meeting somebody new. I

feel at a disadvantage. I'm afraid of meeting people cleverer than myself."

"Oh, Claudia isn't that," she heard him say. Patricia's eyes opened in the safe darkness. Oho! she wonderingly said to herself. That did not sound much like an attempt to discourage a conceited young woman. How strange he was!

"I think she is." A very subdued voice conveyed the disclaimer. Edgar made no reply. Patricia, who believed him incapable of inspiring affection, felt a remarkable little flood of liking fill her heart. What a peculiar effect Edgar had upon her. He made her feel like a very small girl, much younger than himself, much weaker and sillier and less splendid than usual, but in no way distressed by the sensation. Childishly, there darted into Patricia's mind the wish that she had also possessed a brother—a brother something like Edgar, who could understand what was said to him, who did not all the time make demands, who was safe and sure and reliable.

A sigh shook her. It was so light as to be imperceptible to her companion. Her eyes filled with tears. At times in Patricia's conquering life there came instants when she would have given the world to rest quite quietly upon some such strong human support. Moments of loneliness sometimes assailed her, when a sustaining hand would have been of all things the most welcome. She did not feel lonely with Edgar—only happy and at ease. She was now very happy indeed. Then the moment's mood passed, and she was once again alert, and, immediately afterwards, troubled by another thought. She did not know that she was hiding her heart even from herself.

The walk from the Maynes' house was an affair of perhaps half-an-hour. Their course lay almost directly south; but the intersection of the streets was imperfect, so that they had occasionally to take sharp turns. It was a fine starry night, and the stars seemed to yellow the lamps which at regular intervals shed very definitely restricted rays into the darkness. Tall houses stood erect upon each side of every road, and every now and then the walkers passed loitering couples or other pedestrians. Very few people, however, were in the streets; for the night, although serene, was chilly and therefore untempting.

Patricia could see the lamps winking in the distance, and whenever she came into that little glow which surrounded each of them she had a curious sense of her own physical appearance, as though she could see herself. She walked well, and enjoyed the swinging motion. She felt strangely at peace, and spoke without effort. And then suddenly, when they were close to a lamppost and could see all around them faintly illuminated, two other people—a man and a girl—coming from the opposite direction, were simultaneously within the circle of light. A quick greeting passed, and the parties were once more separated, lost in the immediate darkness.

Neither Edgar nor Patricia spoke—Patricia because a shock had gone straight to her heart and left her breathless. The two who had thus unexpectedly emerged and disappeared in that silent moment were Harry and Rhoda Flower. The shock had been like a dagger in Patricia's heart. All her talk ceased. She felt that all her happiness was extinguished. She continued to walk by Edgar's side; but it was as one numbed and be-

wildered by a tragic happening. They were both very silent for the remainder of the journey, all the ease of their companionship destroyed.

At parting Patricia kept her betraying face half turned from Edgar, and stayed only for the briefest and coldest "Good night, and thank you," before setting her key to the door and slipping into the house. But Edgar had not failed to see that she was quite colourless, so that he too had something to think about upon his return journey.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE SIBYL

i

DURING that evening Edgar had been away from the others for about half-an-hour, seated in his room with bundles of papers belonging to his business. This was enforced, because his absence from England had led to great accumulations of work, and only by some such evening trouble could he hope to make good the time lost from the daily routine. So he had been busy. And quite by accident, Edgar had come across a single sheet of paper which had disturbed him out of all proportion to its size and importance among its fellows. It was with other papers in a small bundle surrounded by an elastic band; and in glancing through this bundle, flicking the letters apart, Edgar had caught sight of an arresting address. Hastily, though still without more than casual interest, he had stretched the band so as to see the whole of the letter. It was the signature which, taken in conjunction with the heading, had brought an exclamation to his lips. It had thrown him quite unexpectedly into a revelation concerning Monty Rosenberg. It opened to his investigation some at least of the interstices of Monty's dark and secret mind.

The occasion of Monty's sudden need of money had been for Edgar a curious puzzle. Monty's unwillingness to follow the obvious course, which was to raise a loan from his bank to tide him over the emergency, had been another puzzle. The third puzzle had been his reason for approaching Edgar for assistance. Edgar had explained the third puzzle by the fact that he had recently

been engaged in business dealings with Monty (over the transfer to himself of the "Antiquarian's Gazette," in which no money had passed), and the possibility that Monty, who was secretive by nature, had no friend intimate enough to be asked—without explanation—for so large an amount as two-thousand five-hundred pounds. And the other two puzzles were both explained by the letter which Edgar had discovered.

The letter was written upon a single sheet of business note-paper, and was an acknowledgment of some trivial communication. But the heading was that of the South Hampstead branch of the Great Central Bank; and the signature was plainly to be read as "Frederick Tallentyre, Branch Manager." It became immediately clear why Monty should have wished to conceal any adjustment of his affairs from the manager of his local bank. Less clear was the immediate occasion. Frederick Tallentyre was the husband of Blanche. And Blanche, unless Edgar's perceptions were at fault, was Monty's present mistress. Now why should Monty want so large a sum at short notice? And why should he wish the fact of his requiring a loan concealed from the husband of his mistress?

That was one of Edgar's preoccupations as he walked homeward. As a business man, he needed to know as much as possible about all those with whom he was engaged in financial transactions, and he was not so wealthy as to regard two-thousand five-hundred pounds as a negligible sum. Had the money something to do with Blanche? And, if so, what had it to do with her?

ii

The second and even more pressing preoccupation was with Patricia and Harry. It had been clear to Ed-

gar that Patricia, when he met her at Monty's, was changed, that she was not at peace. She had been restless and emotional beyond the ordinary. It seemed that her attitude to himself was different, and less cordial. He loved her, and any change was thus of importance to him. The same air of reluctance in her glances and speeches had been apparent during this evening. Only upon their walk had she seemed to return to an ordinary *cameraderie*. And at the height of their newly-rediscovered ease this encounter with Harry Greenlees had spoiled everything. Or had it been the encounter with Rhoda? Could it be—and Edgar's heart leapt at the thought—that Patricia had with chagrin noticed him in Rhoda's company at Monty's party; had thought . . . It was fantastic. Patricia was not crude enough for that. Edgar brushed aside any notion so preposterous. Harry, then. . . . His mouth became stern.

Edgar was not, outside of business, analytical; but he took intricate views of whatever was unfamiliar. And Patricia was unfamiliar. She was his new and precious delight. During the whole of the evening he had watched her without direct scrutiny; had felt, and not calculated, her changes of expression, the quick, gentle turns of her head, the speedless flights of amusement, interest, disdain, hostility, and sympathy which were so easily to be read. And in each reference to himself he had discerned something unwelcome—flattering, perhaps, as showing that she did not ignore him; but unwelcome. All the arch curiosity which might have accompanied any consciousness of attraction was absent. What if this should be explicable by some feeling for Harry? It might easily be so. Edgar knew that, so far as he could imagine the standards of a young girl's heart and mind, there was no comparison between Harry and himself. Harry was a big fellow with a

handsome face, a ready tongue, charm—with the very qualities, in fact, to make him the subject of sentimental dreams. And Edgar could not refuse to suppose Patricia capable of sentimental dreams. He fought against the notion; but common sense had greater power over him than the instinct to idealise the beloved. He recognised that Patricia, like other young girls, was probably romantic. Well, he was no figure of romance. That was all. If she employed romantic standards he stood no chance of winning her love in return for his devotion. The battle was lost before issue was joined.

iii

He awoke still less sanguine, but with a grimness which was not unfamiliar. After all, he had certain obvious advantages. He might be less showy than Harry; but he was not insignificant. If it came to the test of brain, his own was not inferior. His position was assured, while Harry's was probably that of a free-lance—delightful in youth, but dwindling and even becoming precarious with the passing of each year. More than that, however. Edgar had the knowledge that Harry succeeded easily. He could tell that Harry took little heed for the morrow. That unlined youthful face, in a man not much younger than himself, told him a good deal. He put Harry down as thirty-five. And if a man had not taken thought by the time he is thirty-five he will never begin to take thought after that age. He may harden; but he will never mature. Also, if a man is not married by the time he is thirty-five, there is generally a reason. It might be, as it was in Edgar's own case, that he has worked too hard, so that all his energy has been absorbed. That was not Harry's position. He was not married because he did not wish to be married.

He pleased too easily, and he was not the sort of man who finds marriage an excellent starting-point for inexhaustible love-affairs.

No! Edgar was quite generous to Harry. He saw him as a man free from that skidding of the mind which is called sentimentalism. Love affairs—yes; but always sporting. As a man he had no objection to Harry. Directly, however, Harry appeared in the neighbourhood of Patricia, the situation changed. It would almost equally have changed if Harry had begun to make love to Claudia. He did not know that Claudia would have found Harry tiresome; but that was because he did not perceive that in calling himself unattractive, he spoke without her authority. And as for Patricia—who could tell what Patricia thought or felt? For all Edgar knew she might have fallen in love with the man whose dancing she so much admired; or with the pink and white baby who performed with the fire-irons, or with Monty Rosenberg. She might be incapable of falling in love with anybody, through self-infatuation, which is a disease greatly in vogue in modern times. She might give her love in time even to Edgar Mayne.

Edgar somehow thought, as he shaved, that this was not so improbable as he had felt on the previous evening or upon his awakening.

iv

Claudia was the first person Edgar encountered that day. She was sitting by the fire in the breakfast-room, eating an apple and reading "The Daily Courier." A dress of blue serge with a small green collar and green cuffs made her look very slim and juvenile. Her dark hair, in a billow, hid part of her face as she bent over the paper; and Edgar could barely catch a glimpse of her eyelashes and the rather inquisitive tip of her nose.

At the other end of her person there was a considerable display of ankle, small and well-shaped.

"Hullo, good-morning!" said Claudia cheerfully. "Nobody else down yet, my poor boy. And I only got up to see you. I think that girl's splendid." She cast aside her paper. "You've got good taste in people, Edgar. I've noticed it. She's got one fault; and I'm going to cure her of it. I'm going to take that girl in hand."

"I wonder if she'd do the same for you," pondered Edgar aloud, as he rang for breakfast.

"She may try. Don't you want to know her fault?" asked Claudia, with a straight glance.

"Perhaps I know it."

"Perhaps you do." The acknowledgment was faintly puzzled. "But you like her, don't you?"

"Very much."

"She's *almost* good enough for you to marry." Claudia was reflective.

"Oh, not quite?" innocently asked Edgar. "No, I suppose not." He was too well-acquainted with Claudia to be drawn, even if he had supposed her to be angling for an admission, which she was not.

"Is she rich?"

"I've no idea."

"I shall find out. I think she's poor. And that's one reason why this fault of hers is a danger."

They seated themselves at the table, and began to eat moderately warm breakfast.

"Why do you think it's a danger?" asked Edgar.

"Well . . ." Claudia spoke with her mouth full; but she was full of candour, because she and Edgar were the best friends in the world. "You see, Edgar, she's conceited. It may be only skin deep; but if it isn't, then she's hopeless. I mean, if it's ingrained."

Edgar felt a creeping of the flesh. His grave expression of interest did not change; but his breath was a little short.

"She's very young, of course," he objected. "Isn't conceit a phase with some people?"

"I hope to cure her. But you'd admit it's a very dangerous thing to have in the blood."

"You're very wise, Claudia," he said, after a pause.

"I'm vain; and you're proud (which is a sort of vanity); and we're both obstinate. But we're not conceited. Now Patricia thinks no end of herself. She's got the idea that there's something wonderful just in the fact that she's herself. At least, I think so."

"She thought you were cleverer than she was. She liked you."

"Well, that's good," said Claudia. Edgar smiled. "No, don't you see, it's good because it shows . . . All the same, it's wrong to compare yourself."

"I've just been comparing myself with another man. I thought I came out of it rather well, on the whole . . ."

"Silly! That sort of thing's . . ."

"I was quite serious."

"Then you're in love. That's all I can say. And I don't *want* you to be in love—yet I like Patricia awfully. I'm going to see her; and I think I'm going to cure her of her fault. But if I *don't* cure her, then I'd sooner you didn't fall in love with her."

"I don't think we'll quite assume . . ."

"My dear Edgar. You can't bring a girl to this house without my realising that something's up. You'll grant that, won't you? I don't mean the ordinary inspection. Less crude than that, I hope. But none the less pretty obvious."

"I can see that it was a very incautious thing to do," admitted Edgar, solemnly.

"Therefore—" "Miaow!" cried Percy from outside the door. Claudia rose to admit him, speaking as she crossed the room. "Therefore—good-morning, Percy—I consider that I'm called on to protect you. You're fortunate in having me. Of course, mother's fallen in love with her on the spot; and *hopes* she will attract you."

For the first time Edgar showed signs of embarrassed exasperation.

"She's idiotic!" he muttered.

"The older generation," calmly explained Claudia. "That's what *that* is. You'd admit that I'm much more realistic. I'm not by any means sure that Patricia's . . . well, eager to attract you. She ought to be, because you're the best man she's ever likely to meet. But you can't tell. When a girl's conceited, she tries this man and that until she's afraid of missing the train altogether. And then she plunges, and . . . well!"

"Claudia, you make me uncomfortable by your profundity," said Edgar, respectfully.

She bowed to him across the table.

"Mother says I'm an *enfant terrible*. I have already told her that I'm a child of my generation. In some ways I know much more than you do, Edgar."

"In all, my dear. In all," was his modest rejoinder. "You also talk more. But I hope you will save Patricia."

"If I don't, nobody can," said Claudia. "But she may have to have a . . . Well, we'll see. I was going to say she might have to burn her fingers. I wonder how you'd like that. Not much, I expect. Edgar, there's something I want to ask you. . . ."

v

Edgar looked at his watch.

"I oughtn't to stay," he said. "Fill my cup first. I shall be listening."

"What's a man's feeling about a girl?" Edgar waited. "I mean, about things she does."

"What things?"

"Reckless things. Silly things. I expect men feel different things—and different things about different girls—and different things about different girls at different times. But what I mean is this. All girls except me have very much more liberty than they used to do.—Well, even me, then; but they use their freedom differently. They go about freely, and so on. Don't they? Well, they do silly things—compromise themselves."

"I should think it's harder to do that now than it used to be."

"It's very funny—I don't think it is, somehow. It's all a convention. You can do certain things; but not others. It's odd. But that's not what I wanted to ask you. What I meant was—if somebody had been silly—had, we'll say, gone off with a man, found she didn't care for him, left him. . . . How would you feel about . . . about marrying her?"

"You alarm me!" cried Edgar, still a little amused, but with a constriction of the heart. And then, for a moment, it crossed his mind that she might even be hinting at something which he dared not contemplate. His mind went straight to Harry, to the meeting. . . . He was conscious of a cold sweat. The thing was so monstrous, and the feeling it aroused in him so passionate, that he did not understand until he had recovered composure what it was further that Claudia was saying.

"That is how you feel?" Claudia was persisting. "You do feel . . . well, horror?"

Edgar looked at her. Gradually his expression lightened. Claudia's face was so earnest, her concern to know his view was so obviously sincere.

"I couldn't possibly tell you how I should feel," he answered, smiling.

"Would you marry a girl who . . . well, who wasn't quite . . . wasn't quite fresh?"

Forgetting the horror he had glimpsed, Edgar thought for an instant.

"It all depends on the girl's attitude," he ventured. "I think for me it would be a question of whether there was any confusion in her mind between me and the other man. If there were, I wouldn't marry her."

"You do admit the right of a girl to freedom of every kind of action?"

"In theory."

"Not in fact?" Claudia was very eager. Edgar answered definitely.

"Not in fact. Any more than I admit the same right in a man."

"Ah, that's the point! You admit the right; but you don't think it should be indulged. I quite agree, Edgar. It's because it affects other people. That's ethics; not conventions. All the difference in the world. Thank you. I've been thinking about it a good deal, and I wanted to hear what you felt. Good boy!"

As he rose from the table, Claudia also rose, and gave him that rare thing, a kiss. For Claudia was no more demonstrative of affection than her brother.

"Sorry to have been a bore," she said abruptly. "I wanted to know. It hadn't anything to do with—with what we'd been talking about, you know."

"God forbid!" said Edgar, as he turned away from her in some haste.

Claudia returned to Percy, who had jumped upon her chair and was giving little sniffs at the odours of breakfast. She patted Percy's head, or rather, his nose, so that he scowled at her; and, after having lifted Percy to another chair, poured herself more coffee. Although Claudia looked so young, and her movements were still the free movements of youth, she was rather grave as she sat at the table. So many little thoughts and intuitions, chiefly about Edgar, but some of them about Patricia, ran in her head. She could not be other than grave.

vi

Edgar went straight out of the house after he had left Claudia in the breakfast room. He could not at first understand why he felt so extraordinarily miserable as he walked along the street; but he awoke to find his own exclamation, "God forbid!" dinning in his ears. What if the subject Claudia had introduced *were* something to do with Patricia! His mind was instantly alight. The man distraught by love will believe almost anything evil of the inscrutable mistress—that she is a devil, harlot, liar, angel, fool. . . . Edgar was not so extreme; but he was filled with that wild electricity of emotion which accompanies the throwing into a combustible mind of any such suggestion. His day was spoilt because of this one frantic thought. There was no pity here for Patricia; no understanding; only the fierce blaze of uncontrollable mental agitation. His heat cooled, of course; but the effect of it remained. Edgar knew that those calm doubtings and considerations of the night and morning were but the shadows of his real doubtings. Of consideration he had none: only a fire that smoul-

dered, and that looked and felt like coldness. But he did not dare to recall the subject of the morning talk, or Claudia's dissociation of it from the discussion of Patricia's nature. To have done so would have brought him to a pitch of unmanageable fear. As it was, the thought, although suppressed, lay full of secret life.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: ANOTHER DAY

i

WHILE Edgar speculated, Patricia suffered. Her vanity had been wounded by Harry's silence: the meeting, which showed her that he was solacing himself with Rhoda, wounded her vanity yet more. It was a mortal blow to her sense of power. Parting might have been sweet pain. This was otherwise. It was a shuddering anguish. Soberly Patricia tried to face the truth: her mind could not grasp it. She could not suppose that the romance—so sweet, so almost childish—was concluded. Although her words, and even her thoughts, were frequently those of a woman, her heart was still the easily wounded heart of a child. She had been living in a dream; and nobody would tarry until her due awakening. She found herself in a discouraging world where the grown-up is still all-powerful. Harry was a man, fixed in rigid manhood, without the gift of indefinite spiritual expansion; and she had hoped that he was still a boy, still able to play, still able to postpone his maturity until some vaguely contemplated future. Her dream was shown to have been a folly.

It was to the sense of disaster that Patricia came. Not yet to desperation.

ii

That morning it occurred to her to look at her bank-book. Two manuscripts had been returned through the post; and as she ate her breakfast Patricia suddenly recollected that she had not had anything accepted for

some weeks. A tremor went through her. Her eyes flinched. Supposing . . . With some anxiety she counted the small amount of money in her purse. And then, as she continued to sit in that constricted room with the low ceiling and the sun-stained wallpaper, the room seemed to grow darker. The oilcloth and rug grew more tawdry. The whole of her surroundings were seen as deplorable. Patricia had thought little of money lately, for she had given all her attention to the delightful play that was in progress; and she had worked without earnest endeavour. It had not appeared necessary, and the fancies had come with ease. So often her eyes had wandered, and her memories and anticipations had become exciting; and when that happened the pen strayed on only half-heeded, or remained quite still upon the table. And now, with this awakening, what she had written seemed to Patricia silly and babyish and without value, with all the pleasant sportiveness by which it had been inspired wholly evaporated. And she found that she had other things to face besides the loss of Harry.

For a few minutes she pretended that there was nothing to fear, that there must lie pounds and weeks between the moment and the end of comfort. Her confidence was staunch. Nothing to fear . . . nothing to fear. . . . She was Patricia Quin. Just as she felt that she would never die, so Patricia felt that she would never want. It was true, perhaps. And yet when her thoughts tried to create money out of nothing it did not seem clear how she was to live . . . presently . . . soon . . . very soon . . .

Without preparation, Patricia's courage suddenly deserted her. She lost her nerve. She no longer had her dream of Harry: she was awake: she was stifling. And disaster lay ahead. She wasn't any good. . . . She was afraid.

"I'm afraid," she whispered to herself, with bowed head. "I'm a coward!" It was for Patricia a terrible confession. Energy, confidence, egotism as a rule sustained her in every shock. Now these things were deserting her in face of a spectre. In vain did she rally. It was true: she was afraid.

iii

With the expression of a baby that is afraid and is trying not to confess it; with eyes that seemed to grow larger each minute and a mouth that was pursed in fear that masqueraded as courage, Patricia stood alone in that ugly little room with the highly coloured furnishings and the gilded mirror. She knew she had her friends, who would welcome her rich or poor, but they would welcome a happy Patricia, and not one who was cowed by disaster. Such a Patricia as this would be unfamiliar. She could never bear to go among them starving or wretched. Where she had queened it, she could never play Cinderella. But when her imagination darted ever so little forward—to the day when the money which had seemed such wealth was exhausted,—Patricia heard pity, and shrank from it. Hers was the panic cry: "All is lost!" She had been bold; her way had seemed so clear, so conquering. In that minute of discovery it was not surprising that confidence vanished. She was not one used to hardship, to the canvassing of expedients. All her life had been spent thoughtlessly so far as provision for anything beyond the moment was involved. She had no preparation at all for this emergency. She had awakened to nightmare.

With nerves shaken, and despair almost at her elbow, ready to plunge into her heart at a motion, Patricia tried to think. If her money went, what prospects were

there? Harry's help—no! She could never appeal to Harry. That was a new thought, and one which confirmed her decision. In no circumstances whatever could she ever have gone to Harry as one humiliated. Nor could she have married him except for love, as an equal—as a superior, the adored, the shining wonderful of her own dreams. Marriage occurred to her—marriage as a way out of want—as it has occurred many times to women;—and it was only without true imagination that she saw it. It was a suggestion made by her inexperience—the sort of careless, unrealised notion that trips off the mind's surface. She knew that at any time she could have married Jacky; and the notion almost, even in the midst of her distress, made her laugh. It was absurd. Jacky! Jacky as a husband, a perpetual companion! There was nobody whom she could marry. A situation? Who would employ her? Now, when men and women were clamouring for work! And how, after so much liberty, endure the constraints and disciplines of office life! Impossible.

Dry-eyed and wretched, Patricia received her shock. She was stunned. A day earlier—in full panoply, deliciously happy, self-enchanted, inspired with the greatest ambitions, now she was amazed to find how insubstantial were the foundations of her confidence. In an instant, from independence, she had fallen to a paralysing discovery. Patricia was terrified. The knowledge that she was only a frightened, inexperienced little girl was borne in upon her.

iv

If she could have been caught in that mood by somebody capable of understanding her, who would have taken all her native silliness at its true value as the ebul-

lience of youth, Patricia might have been turned at this moment into a channel leading straight to growth and happiness. But there was nobody at hand. There so rarely is anybody at hand. She had friends, but no friend. She was entirely without a friend to whom she could turn for renewal of that self-justification which is essential to happiness. She had been without a guide all her life, and all the acquaintances of the last few weeks were self-engrossed and pleasure-loving. She had been so wonderful, and now she saw that the power upon which she had counted did not exist. She was alone, and that was the consciousness which for Patricia lay uppermost. She was alone. Although she tried very hard to bluster, it was forced home to her that nobody cared very much what she did with her life. Harry had wanted her for himself, to make love to, to play with; never for the sake of seeing that she made the best of herself. He had not been interested in her. He had not imagined her. He did not love Patricia: he was merely "in love" with her, which meant that she provided, in her response, flattery to his own self-love.

Not a real friend: they did not grow in this heartless realm. There was only one house in London which she had felt as a home; and Claudia she hardly knew, while she was sure that Edgar Mayne, although he was kind, was inhuman. He could never understand that she was Patricia Quin, the marvellous Patricia; and that so she must remain in her own eyes for weeks and months and years to come—she believed, for ever. When she thought of him it was of one whose friendship she might value if only he would do what he could never do—acknowledge her will as a thing quite as splendid as his own. No friend: she was alone. A sob shook Patricia. The first hint of desperation showed in her. She gave a sob. What did it matter *what* she did? Nobody

cared. Again that surge of arrogance swept—now a little less strongly—over her. She could rely upon only herself; and she was a little girl. Edgar was grown-up. Harry was grown-up. Amy was grown-up. They were all finished: only Patricia had the power of infinite growth. They could none of them understand her. She was too big to be understood—too big, and too childishly helpless. Patricia angrily wiped away two tears which had stolen out on to her cheeks. The contrast between her egotism and her situation was insufferable. She felt reckless, without hope. Who cared?

v

She was dining that night with Monty; and they were going on to dance at a club. She supposed it would be Topping's, but she was not sure. And as she wiped away her tears Patricia felt glad to be going out to dance. She thought that for one evening at least she would be able to forget that she had lost Harry and that she was on the verge of poverty. Still with that expression of fear and misery upon her face, she began to wonder about the dress she would wear, and about the evening, and about Monty; and as she did this her heart was a little eased at the distraction of her thoughts, and a more cheerful glance gave freshness to her appearance. She might still be fearful; but at any rate she was—ever so slightly—relieved. Complete disaster was not yet.

The day went on, very slowly, giving Patricia time for many changes of emotion between her fear and her arrogance, for tears and blustering or consoling speeches and recoveries; and by the evening she had become calmer. But the assertion of self-control had been purchased. She was no longer normal. The knocking of a postman in the street below made her heart flutter, and her ears

strain. Any violent noise was enough to set her nerves jangling. With her mind lost, she could not do anything with concentration, but committed mistakes in spelling, wrote words that made nonsense, spilt water from the vase she had just re-filled, and almost broke the vase itself by striking it against the table in inattentive blindness. And at last the day grew dark, and then it seemed as though the lighted gas tried her eyes, making them smart, and as though the atmosphere were unaccountably heavy. Out-of-doors it was raw, with a mist rising. Within, the heat was dry and exhausting. And the hours would not pass quickly enough. They dallied slowly round the clock, and she watched the seconds hand with impatience from quarter to quarter. The room grew smaller and smaller, closing in upon her until she sprang to her feet as if to force the walls apart, so that she could breathe.

vi

The meeting with Monty was for seven o'clock, and the little restaurant where they were to dine was already half-full of people when Patricia arrived. She went straight in, and saw Monty waiting in the hall of the restaurant, his overcoat already discarded, and a cigarette between his lips. For the first time that day Patricia's heart really lightened. Monty was in evening dress (for so it had been arranged), and he always looked his most handsome when dressed. The white shirt enhanced the olive darkness of his skin, and the beautifully cut coat made him look slimmer than he was. And there was a quality in Monty's caressing manner which pleased and soothed Patricia. It was full of admiration. Monty had very dark and tired eyes, which seemed never to yield their secrets. There was power in his carriage. Everything about Monty, from his bearing to his finger

tips, suggested luxury and invulnerability. He seemed always just to have left the hands of his hairdresser and the manicurist.

And on this evening he was more than ever regal and courteous. His quick glance was full of sympathy and reassurance, as though he were saying: "You are unhappy, but you look, as usual, incomparably lovely. You deserve, and you shall have, all the consolation, all the happiness that I can give you; and it will make me very proud if you will let me entertain you with all the resources of expensiveness and unobtrusive delicacy." Spoken, the words would have been odious; conveyed, they were as balm.

"Come straight in," murmured Monty, his hand upon her wrist. Patricia could still feel that he bore about him the aroma of the Egyptian cigarette which he had thrown away, and it seemed appropriate to him. He had for her the attractiveness of something exotic. The proximity of that dark face and dark head was agreeable; where all was softness and gentle modulation, she, too, could not fail to yield. "How punctual you always are! I've got a table there—in the far corner. It will be quieter. And I ventured—you will excuse me?—to order the dinner."

With a checked sigh, Patricia allowed Monty to help her with her coat, so that her arms might be free; and as he seated himself opposite she smiled. She did not know that it was a pathetic smile: she would have blushed had she known it. But Monty's glance seemed to be everywhere, although it was so seldom anything but gentle and melancholy. He spoke to the waiter, who disappeared and returned too quickly to allow of any talk in the interval. The waiter bore two small glasses.

"This is a very exceptional cocktail," said Monty. "It will do you good."

Patricia held out her hand for the glass he extended. For the first time in her life she was eager for stimulant. She drank the cool bitter drink, which sent a slow motion of revived life through her, and filled her eyes and made the feeling of dispirited tiredness recede. Monty was watching her.

"*Very* good," Patricia assured him. She saw the black head inclined, the slow smile which crossed Monty's face; and upon the table his plump and beautifully shapely hand as he received his own glass. As he did this, a waiter brought a shining bucket, containing ice, held a bottle for verification, and drew with a muffled pop the wine-cork. Patricia started: Monty was giving her champagne. How glad she was! It was as if he had known that she was miserable, and had planned to disperse the shadow. It was magic.

"You like the wine dry?" said Monty. "This is Ruinart."

Patricia nodded, shyly smiling. How kind he was! How kind and consoling and suave and perfectly controlled. As if he had known! Her heart warmed. Already the wretchedness of the day was slipping out of her memory. Her spirits were rising with each instant. She was growing happy.

vii

"You're tired," suggested Monty. "Don't talk. Keep very still, and your headache will go. Let me do the talking. I'm not so used to that as some of our friends are; and it will please me and rest you. Will you have some of this—and this?" His voice was so low, and its quality had so much the soft smoothness of velvet, that every word brought peace. "It ought to be possible for us all to leave England now and follow the sun. One ought now to be starting for the East,

where the sun is, and spending the days in winter quarters. We ought to be going soon to Tunisia or beyond, further than the winter tourists go; and then we could come back and explore the ruins of Carthage; and you should learn all about the ancient civilisations, and forget that this sharp and strident Europe exists. It's so very lovely to travel back gradually to the West, and to see Sicily, where the most beautiful things in the world are; or it must be enchanting to go to India, to those places where Europeans rarely go, and learn something about the Hindu philosophy by going back for a dozen or so centuries and forgetting that the world as we know it has any existence. I've never been to India; but one day I shall go, because the wish to see it is growing stronger and stronger, and I'm afraid of dying or growing old before I've savoured all the beauties of the unfamiliar."

Monty spoke very slowly, and as if to cast a spell upon her, so that she might forget her tiredness and her headache. Patricia nodded. She thought how beautiful it would be to escape from all her present distress, and to wander over the face of the earth, where there was always sunshine and happiness.

"I should like," continued Monty, "to travel by car all over the world, and go through the roads, staying where the fancy suggested, and going on when I was tired. It would be very good to go through France, and Northern Italy, and on to the East. One's seen the familiar beauties. Now is the time to try and see what remains."

"I haven't seen even the familiar beauties," said Patricia, staring straight in front of her. In imagination she could see a long white road winding towards distant mountains. "I've never been out of England. Why, I still think that to go to France and Italy and Spain would

be the most glorious thing in the world. Perhaps I shall go, one day."

"Nothing could be easier, I'm sure," sympathised Monty. "Why not go?"

"Because I haven't any money," retorted Patricia. "You can't go, if you haven't any money."

"You should get somebody to take you," ventured Monty. "It could easily be arranged."

Patricia remained serious: Harry, she knew, tramped through Europe. It would have been easy to go with him. He would make everything easy. A film was across her eyes. Meditatively, forgetting Monty, she sipped her champagne, and felt its incomparable pricking upon her tongue, delicious and golden.

"Yes, it could easily be arranged," said Patricia, drowsily. Then a little dryness touched her, and she looked straight at Monty, smiling. "But it won't," she added.

Monty's glance held her eyes for an instant. But Patricia's eyes were blue and clear, as baffling to Monty in their purity as his own were unreadable to Patricia by reason of their impenetrable softness. Something in those eyes smouldered.

"What a pity," said Monty.

viii

Two hours later they were at Topping's, and Patricia was dancing. The champagne had cleared her head, but she had had more to drink than usual, and her lightness was unwelcome. As she left the room where she changed her shoes and handed her coat to an attendant she was moved once more to thought of Harry by memory of her first visit to this place. Her lips seemed to be swollen and to ache, and she had been made short-sighted,

and her lids were hot and unrefreshing to tired eyes. But she was less unhappy, more pliant, more forgetful of the possible disasters of the future. When Monty joined her she took his arm naturally, but also because she felt glad of the safety which his protection gave her. She could not bear to be here alone, to hear the band in the distance, and to think of Harry. It was as though, in touching Monty, she had said: "Take me anywhere—anywhere—so that I shan't think of to-morrow. Because I'm frightened of to-morrow!"

They pressed into the room, through little bunches of people who stood near the door; and Patricia heard the noise incomparably loud in her ears, and she was dancing with Monty as if there were to be no to-morrow. The champagne had robbed her of the power to feel: she was numbed by it; but it had given her brain clearness and vivacity. When suddenly she caught sight, among the dancers who were sitting at a neighbouring table, of Harry and Rhoda, the shudder which ran through her body was unconcealed. Tears filled her eyes. Monty could not have failed to observe her emotion; but his acknowledgment of it was a warmer pressure of reassurance.

"Don't let's . . . go . . . over there," whispered Patricia. "I don't want to go. I don't . . . like them. I don't want to . . . talk to Harry and Rhoda. Let's . . . keep on dancing. I *want* to."

If only Monty would keep her there, with one arm about her, safe from her unhappiness. . . . If only he would protect her now. . . .

ix

Patricia was not to escape Harry; for she and Monty had presently to rest. They sat at one of the tables, and

Monty ordered some more to drink, and gently urged Patricia to join him. As she was hesitating, refusing, yielding, a voice came from behind them which sent a tremor through her. Harry and Rhoda stood there, laughing like children who had stolen unawares upon sleeping elders.

"Hullo!" cried Harry. "Hullo, Patricia!"

Rhoda drew up a chair to Patricia's side, and began vivaciously to talk. Patricia had a glimpse of the dead white cheeks and red lips and full dark eyes, and struggled to carry on a conversation with Rhoda while she was giving all her attention to what was passing behind her, between the two men.

"Saw you when you first came in!" said Rhoda. "What a pretty dress that is. This blue . . . there aren't many complexions that would stand it. Yours does, though. I'm sticking to black just now. Makes me look svelte. I'm getting fat. You've been dining with Monty, I suppose. Lucky girl. I had to dig Harry out. He's working like a nigger. Going abroad. . . ."

"I . . . had . . . to . . . dig . . . Harry . . . out! . . . He's . . . going . . . abroad!" That was all Patricia heard. "He's going abroad . . . going to the East, and the sun, perhaps . . . tramping in the sun, making everything . . . easy."

"I wish . . . I were going . . . abroad," stammered Patricia.

"Wouldn't it be jolly. I say, let's *all* go! If you could get somebody . . . You could join us somewhere . . . I mean . . ." Rhoda checked herself. Patricia shrank back.

"No, no!" she whispered. But she had heard the words which Rhoda had spoken so thoughtlessly. And behind her was Harry's voice, quite quietly saying:

"Let's change partners for a dance, Monty. I . . ."

Her hand shot out uncontrollably. A "no" started to her lips. She heard Monty say with equal quietness, in his thick sweet voice:

"By no means, Harry. I wouldn't deprive you of your partner for the world. How entirely charming she looks, with that ivory skin. . . ."

"Patricia," said Harry, at her side, his lips to her ear. "Dance this once with me. Dear, I want you to. This once."

She looked up at him with something of the old insolent laughter in her eyes.

"What nonsense!" she said, rather breathlessly. "I'm with Monty."

She was quite cold to Harry now; but she would have died rather than dance with him.

x

When once more she was dancing, Patricia felt that the encounter, the blow, the opportunity, had caused her spirits to mount. And her gratitude to Monty was vehement. She yielded herself completely to the sensuous enjoyment of the dance, to Monty's immaculate skill, to the secret enchantment that bound her. She could feel Monty's soft, wine-laden breath upon her cheek, and the occasional contact of his body with her own; and she did not in any smallest degree shrink from him. But the emotion which she experienced was tinged with recklessness. She was being sustained by fierce resistance to the shadow of desperation, which now, as the evening neared its end, grew ever nearer.

"I'm sorry. I ought to have been able to avoid that encounter. I didn't see Harry until they were there,"

Patricia heard Monty saying in her ear. She laughed back.

"It didn't matter in the least," she said. "It was fun. I enjoyed it."

And having heard herself laugh, she laughed again, each moment more elated by the wine she had drunk and the blatant noise with which the room was filled to echoing and the excitement which accompanied the noise and gave it significance. She could see the smouldering light leap again into Monty's eyes, and she was thrilled anew with revived consciousness of power. It intoxicated her. That sweeping sense of invincibility came back and settled upon Patricia like a golden cloud which had strayed. She was extraordinarily lovely. The glitter of her fair hair in the bright light, and the pure beauty of her clear eyes, and the life in all her features, were enhanced and made wonderful. Monty's attraction to her was so manifest that she could not but respond to it. The little darting spice of mischief was in her expression; but he could see that her nostrils were pinched above the parted lips, as though she were trying to restrain the betrayal of her inclination towards him. Never had Patricia shaken herself so free from care; never had she been so aware of the secret jubilation which she felt at being admired. She was excitedly happy, but with a new feeling that was not zest, that was, instead, a knowledge of peril—even a deliberate and wanton encouragement of it.

Patricia chose to go home by omnibus. She knew that if they went otherwise Monty must inevitably make love to her; and although she was warmed and excited, and so, amorous, she was restrained from *abandon* by some timidity, rather than by distaste or a saving caution. Monty's desire for her was palpable: Patricia could not be unaware of it. The knowledge was in her blood, and it fired her; but she was not experienced or callous or

bold enough to yield to her own importunities. Reckless though she felt, she must at all costs gain time. She was not ready—she was maliciously tantalising—she was inspirited and moved and made tremulous with fierce and unusual excitement. And so, to gain time, Patricia chose to travel in the open. Some colour to her preference was given by the fact that the evening was brilliantly fine, and Monty remained inscrutably unruffled to the end. He was never more characteristic than in his watchful impassivity. But as they parted he quickly and deliberately put his arm round her, as if it might have been for one further dance. Patricia did not protest. She breathed quickly, her lips closely compressed. Even when he stooped and took her hand, and then lingeringly kissed it, she remained, with a sort of excited triumph, and her head back, unflinching. She pressed his hand gently in releasing her own, and stood watching from the open door Monty's retreating figure. He looked back, espied her, hesitated, made as if to return; and was only discouraged by her swift withdrawal. Patricia's eyes were fixed, and she entered the house unseeing, creeping up the stairs, with tightly closed mouth. She was jubilant, cool once more, exulting; and there was for the first time cruelty and baseness in her triumph. Only when she was in her own room, and when she had set the candle down, did she feel the blood flooding her cheek and her neck and even her breast. It receded, and came again, painfully, until her whole body burned. Patricia was ashamed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: CONTRAST

i

PATRICIA thought: How difficult it is to be good! And it's so easy to be wicked. Some people want to be wicked, and can't. It's . . . it's easy.

She was standing in her little brown room and looking at her own reflection in the mirror with the gilded frame. And as she looked at herself, she saw a hardness come, and a new glitter in her eye. And it was then that she realised how easy it was to be wicked, and how difficult to be good. How easy it was to drift into wickedness that made one defiant afterwards, and a little afraid! That made one continue avid of excitement!

Patricia felt that she could not keep still. Such nervous restlessness as she was now experiencing was strange; but she could not keep still. If she sat down she found herself immediately again standing, moving about the room; and stopping, lost in a dream. She could not think consecutively. If she began to think, ridiculous words came into her head from nowhere, and fragments of the speech of somebody else; and cross currents of her own thought interrupted and distracted her attention.

"I'm going mad!" she suddenly thought. And from somewhere came the comment, "Ah, I've noticed that, have I? . . . Pengewith . . . As if it could be helped. . . . Monty was . . . of course, women . . . I wonder how the name Saskatchewan is really pronounced: I suppose it's . . . Yes, mad. Mad, because all this . . . I could go to Africa, Biskra—isn't that where they go? Or Samarkand . . . What beautiful names they have.

. . . I'd like to go travelling on and on, and the moon at night shining on the desert . . . All very quiet, and stars, and peace . . . Horrible insects . . . Stop! Stop!"

Patricia put her hands to her ears, as if in that way to check the nightmare of her thoughts. She forced herself to sit quietly down, to take up a book. Every noise in the house and street was subdued; and after a few moments her eyes would not attend to the page, and her brain would not accept the meaning of the printed word; and these idiotic thoughts came stealthily back as little devils might have done. She was trying hard not to think of something in particular. She was trying not to think of what had happened on the previous evening, of what might still happen. She did not want to face her own actions, or their consequences; and all these devilish little thoughts that so frightened her came because she had as it were locked up the only thing she wanted most desperately to think about, and was refusing to let her mind have free play.

ii

In the afternoon there was a noise at the door, and Lucy put in a pink face. She was washed, and she looked mysterious. A finger was to her lips.

"Some'dy downstairs," she whispered, her lips framing the words. "Miss Roberts. Shall I let her come up?"

Patricia welcomed the thought of a visitor. She brightened at once.

"Oh, *anybody!*" she cried, with a great breath of relief at the prospect of escape from her solitude, and the gnawing thoughts to which she was offering so steadfast a resistance.

"Right!" cried Lucy, who had been secret from a sense of diplomacy. Patricia, hastily scrambling useless papers together, heard Lucy trample down to the front door and send Amy up; and so she went out on to the dark landing to guide and exhort her friend. She was really delighted to see the dim form which she knew to be that of Amy rounding the difficult corner and achieving the ascent. Eagerly she stretched a hand to bring her friend within the tiny, ugly room.

"How nice!" she exclaimed. "Come in. I'm in a muddle; but come in."

"What stairs!" Patricia heard Amy gasp. Then she saw the visitor throw off a cloak and a light hat, and toss her hair. There was a moment's silence as they scrutinised each other. "Patricia, I had to come and see you. You didn't write, or anything." The agitation which Patricia was feeling was as nothing to the agitation which Amy showed. She looked ghastly, and the climb had made her breathe gaspingly. Her lips looked blue.

"I ought to have come." Patricia was filled with remorse.

"No. I—felt I had to see you after the other day. You know, the day you came to see me, and Harry Greenlees came."

"Well!" Patricia gave a startled exclamation. Then she sat down and began to laugh. "What ages ago it seems!" Really, it was incredible! She had almost forgotten the studio and Amy's warning and Harry's arrival. So much had happened in the interval, so poignant had been her emotions, that the reference made her breathless. "Well!"

"I heard Harry was going abroad," pursued Amy, again with that sharp scrutiny. "I was afraid . . ."

"Afraid? Oh, that I might be going, too! But why, Amy? I should have thought you would have known

... Nothing could happen to me—ever—that I didn't . . . I thought . . . I thought a girl ought to be free to live with any man she chose . . . to see. . . ."

Patricia was half-laughing. For this moment she was malicious in the ridicule of such singular concern. She was immediately to learn the occasion of it. Amy, who sat in the only armchair in the room, which had been covered with horsehair, and super-covered (as it were) by a loose envelope that was washable, looked disagreeably back at Patricia in recognition of such levity. Her face, under the stress of recent events, was losing its clearness, and was developing a rough greyness of colour. Her eyes protruded, and the rims of them were faintly pink. Amy was ageing quickly. By thirty she might be unsightly. She was old, and stale, and without any sort of colour or imagination or quality. She repelled Patricia, as a poor relation might have repelled a busy man in difficulties, or as a sick person repels a healthy one.

"I know," she whispered. "I've tried it. I went down to the country with Jack. But I couldn't stand it. It was *awful*. I left him as soon as we got there. Patricia, I couldn't have stayed there with him."

Patricia wheeled round at the incredible announcement. She stared at her friend. An exclamation burst from her lips.

"But Jack!" she cried. "Jack!"

Amy misunderstood her; she thought Patricia was still in a state to harp on the inconsiderateness to Jack.

"Oh, he doesn't matter. He's quite all right——"

"I was thinking . . . Yes . . . I expect he's all right; but I was thinking . . ." stammered Patricia. She was aghast. "Why on earth, if you *were* going, did you go with somebody who bores you? Surely it was mad-

ness! Oh, my *dear!* . . . Amy, you *must* admit that Jack . . .”

“I know. I know. He *is* idiotic. I don’t know why I did it. It seems ridiculous—now. But he kept on saying I ought to go away; and it seemed impossible to go away alone. So I thought—well: he’s supposed to love me. If I can bear it, perhaps . . . You see, I was in despair. Well, it’s no good: that’s all. I’ve been in hell. I got into the next train, leaving him there. I simply went out without telling him, and fortunately caught the only possible train back. It was dreadful to see the train coming, and watch the road in case Jack was coming, too. . . . I felt insane!”

“So I should think,” said Patricia. “Poor Amy!” She had not really any pity for Amy; but she did not know what else to say to this inglorious tale. If she had imagined it, she would have shuddered as at a squalor. She hesitated, her brain active. Then, sharply, she demanded: “Have you seen Jack since?”

Amy nodded, tears in her eyes. She was the picture of lugubriousness. But the colour was rising to her cheeks.

“He says he’s finished with me,” she pulped. “We’ve had a flaming row. He was *filthy!*”

“Good!” cried Patricia, almost with vicious emphasis.

There was a moment’s horrified pause. Then Amy, ignoring the ejaculation, continued:

“However, I shall never be rid of him. He isn’t the sort. He’ll always be thinking I’ll change, and be pestering me. He’s like a cur. The more you kick him, the closer he sticks. I’ve only got to whistle. I loathe him. Don’t let’s talk about Jack. It was only that I had to tell you!” She paused, and then, in a minute, resumed: “Oh, Patricia, I’ve begun painting again, you’ll be glad to hear. I was a fool ever to take any notice of Felix.

Of course, you know what the explanation of *that* was! Mere sexual jealousy. Men simply can't bear a woman to be an artist. It damages their singularity. It was all a part of the sex conspiracy. I might have known! All this upset has revived my ambition. It's done me good, in fact. It's given me impetus. I'm doing something that's going to be *really* good."

Patricia addressed Amy.

"Amy," she said. "You've finished with Jack. If he hasn't finished with you, you must be finished with him. For a man who will still stick to you after that *must* be an idiot. He *couldn't* be any good to you. And if you are going back to painting after swearing as you did that you had done with it, I shall never understand you. It seems preposterous. Why, I can remember—Amy, you were absolutely finished with it. My dear, what's the *good*? As for sex conspiracy—it's laughable! I think you've been behaving very badly, indeed."

"Indeed!" cried Amy, shocked into vituperation by such an onslaught. "And what about yourself, pray? When it comes to bad behaviour?"

It was unanswerable. Patricia flushed, staring.

At this moment, while the two of them were mutually speechless with active hostility, Lucy, interpreting liberally Patricia's welcome to "anybody," and also possibly rather intrigued by the appearance of the caller, personally ushered into the room a second visitor. It was Claudia. She had crossed the landing with a single impetuous step, and her eagerness brought fresh air into the stuffy little room. Her tallness, her dark complexion, the rich crimson of her astrakhan-trimmed cloak, were all such as to make her distinguished. There was animation in Claudia's face which showed her health and tranquillity. The quick immature grace of her movement was lovely. She was free from all self-consciousness.

Only at sight of Amy—stricken by contrast into absolute sickliness of appearance—did she pull up short.

"Oh," she gasped. "I didn't know . . . Sorry!"

"Come in!" Even to Patricia it was evident that Claudia's entry had brought radiance to the room. She hurried across to greet her. "This is my friend Amy Roberts—Miss Mayne."

"I'll go," cried Amy, rising from the armchair.

"No, no. Don't be silly." "Oh, don't . . . I shall feel . . ." There were two protests. But Amy was injured, wounded.

"Yes. I've said all I'd got to say. And listened to some plain speaking. Very plain. And I must get back to my studio. I'll astonish everybody yet! I'm an artist, Miss Mayne, and I can't leave my work for long." She fumbled with her cloak.

"But I shall feel I've driven you away!" cried Claudia, with a puzzled smile.

"You needn't." Amy was brusque in the effort to be dignified; and as she flung on her cloak and hat she gave Claudia a frigid smile. "I was just going in any case." And with that she went to the door. "Good-bye."

"Excuse me." Patricia's glance of reassurance led Claudia to remain, and, as the two others disappeared, to remove her own cloak, and to await Patricia's return. She looked quickly round the shabby room—at the typewriter, the table-cover, the rug, the stained wall-paper, and the glass with the gilt frame. Then she went to the window to glance at the dingy outlook, and returned to sniff the gas-fire.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Claudia, very privately to herself. "The poor thing's stewed alive in smuts up here. It's a *horrible* place—all mouldy. No wonder she's conceited! I should be, myself. She's a dear! As for the other one—pooh!"

iv

She had barely concluded this soliloquy when Patricia, who had run up the stairs, arrived breathless, and closed the door with a rush. She was completely changed.

"It's lovely of you to come," she cried. "I'm ever so glad. And you came opportunely. I don't know what would have happened. I'd been lecturing Amy, and she was excessively cross. She can't bear the truth—or *any* criticism. She's *very* silly!"

"She seemed gloomy," commented Claudia, with some forbearance.

"Oh, she's worse. I couldn't tell you. . . . You see—" Patricia seated herself, all fire to communicate wisdom—"the poor thing is absolutely mad about herself. She was told some time ago that she wasn't any good as an artist. I admit it was heartless, and I don't know who broke the news. I didn't tell her myself, because I didn't know. I may as well admit—I did the same to your brother, as anybody would have to do—that I tried to like her pictures. They're very strange pictures, and apparently everybody laughs at them. They think she's . . . well, no good at all. Well, somebody told her. She was heart-broken. She saw it. She really did see it. She was passionate, and crushed; but she somehow realised that she *wasn't* any good. That was a week ago. But now she's all changed. She thinks it's a conspiracy. Belief in her own genius has come back—twice it's strength!"

"Recoil!" suggested Claudia, elated.

"Something like that. And she's been behaving *atrociously*—to a poor man who loves her. I admit that he's an idiot; but still—even idiots have their rights, you'd think! He isn't a lunatic. I don't mean that he's really mad—only in relation to Amy. And it's bad for

her. It makes her feel a sort of horrible empty power—that he's always there if she needs him. He's just a dog-like creature, filled with devotion. I like him. He's too good for her. But he's perfectly idiotic about Amy."

"I *couldn't* fall in love with that girl," said Claudia distinctly. "I could try to like her; because she's your friend. No more. I think she's probably an egoist; and egoism's a bother."

Patricia was pulled up at this comment.

"There's a lot of good in her," she apologetically explained. "I oughtn't to talk unkindly about her. And I'm afraid I'm rather an egoist myself."

"The first thing you've got to do—if you'll try hard to forgive me for saying such an awful impertinence—is to move out of these rooms," said Claudia, with superficial irrelevance.

Again Patricia received a shock. But she recovered and smiled.

"I can't," she answered. "They're cheap." Then her tone became more sober. "I've got no money at all. In fact . . ." Her lips quivered.

"You couldn't have any money in these rooms," said that distinct voice. "Move out of them. *We'll* get you some money." Claudia spoke with assurance. Patricia was dazzled.

"But how?" she asked. "I'm desperate for it."

"We'll ask Edgar."

"I couldn't. I think . . . I think . . . It seems absurd; but I think perhaps I'm just a little afraid of him."

Claudia surveyed her newest friend with astonishment and approval. Her emotion seemed to be almost one of hopeful relief, which surprised Patricia a good deal. Claudia proceeded.

"Oh, that's awfully good!" she cried. "I'm not afraid of him; but I think it's nice of you to be. I'm pleased

at that. However, you needn't be afraid of him; because . . . Well, what I really came for is to beg you to come home with me for dinner. Could you? Mother and father are having their annual wayzgoose, or beano. It's the anniversary of their wedding. So Edgar and I are dining alone. You needn't change your dress. I shan't. Will you come? Do!"

v

The two girls had tea together at a café, and then walked to the Maynes' house, arriving there before six o'clock. Claudia then hastily telephoned to Edgar, leaving Patricia for the necessary few moments to the entertainment of Percy and Pulcinella. Patricia was once again in that delicately cordial room of blue and blue-grey; and the size of the room as well as the purity of its simple comfort was a solace to her. There were very few pictures in the room, and of these the largest was a strong and beautiful landscape by a modern artist, C. J. Holmes, which gave Patricia delight. All else was unaffected and apparently unstudied. A bright fire burned within the noble grate; and a big old clock ticked hollowly, reminding her of the clock in a half-forgotten poem, which said "Ever—Never—Never—Forever." . . . The room was quite silent except for this ticking and the occasional whispering collapses of fragments of coal. There was an extraordinary peace in this house, and a sense of open space in the sitting-room which was enhanced by the cool tones of the furnishings. Patricia sighed as she sat there alone. The little dog, Pulcinella, a glossy black twisting creature, was exuberant and friendly. Patricia could almost have believed that he recognised her. Percy was more distant. He stared with big steady eyes. But at last he, too, rising from

his place, stretched and yawned, and came slowly across to her side. Here, instead of making any advance, he merely sat with his feathery tail straight behind him on the floor, while he contemplated the stranger in silence.

"Percy," said Patricia. "You're awfully proud."

He looked at her reluctantly. Patricia slipped to her knees beside him, and the little dog came frisking there also. Percy turned a solemn head, in order to watch the gambollings of Pulcinella, and again yawned. His dignified coquetry was engaging. Then he rubbed his head against Patricia's sleeve.

"I wish I had as little care as you," she whispered. And as she sat there her face grew white. She sprang up, transformed from white to red. Memory of the unknown creature she had been on the previous night came destructively to her mind. Her face hardened. "I oughtn't to be here!" Patricia thought, as the conflict between her memory and this pervading tranquillity sank into her mind. "I'm wicked. I *want* to be wicked! Claudia—why, Claudia wouldn't want to be my friend at all if she knew all I think and do and want to do. I'm an impostor. I'm not nice at all. I'm wicked." A great stab of misery held her silent, still scarlet. She even took pleasure in hurting herself, in thinking that she was wicked.

While Patricia was yet stricken with the enormity of her own guilty inclination, Claudia came back into the room, and stood with that air of affection that made Patricia soft towards her new and guileless and altogether innocent friend. Claudia pulled a chair up to the fire, and pointed to it.

"That boy will be here in no time," she gaily said.

"Boy? Oh, how strange to . . ." Patricia checked herself. Almost vaguely, she went on: "I hope he's not coming . . . leaving his work."

"It'll do him good!" cried Claudia, unexpectedly. "What he wants is . . . No, Percy, you mustn't claw!" This last was because Percy was resenting Patricia's neglect and seeking to re-establish their relations. "What Edgar wants is something to save him from work altogether. Work's a great monster."

"I hate it!" acknowledged Patricia. "It's devil-begotten!"

"Edgar's work has made happiness for everybody in this house. Without it, we should be nowhere. We shouldn't exist. But Edgar's the one who gets least out of his work. We're all Old Men of the Sea on his shoulders. I've never thought of that before, by the way. I suppose you didn't happen to think of it, by any chance, and put it into my head?"

"Oh, no," said Patricia naïvely. "You see, I don't . . . don't know Edgar very well."

Claudia gave her a quick side-long glance.

"He knows you pretty well, doesn't he?" she answered. "But of course that's different."

That was the third shock Patricia had received that afternoon from Claudia. She turned as if to answer; but Claudia was moving across the room, and Patricia was left to draw her own inference. The remark had almost seemed to accuse her of injustice to Edgar. And what beyond?

vi

They had dined, and were back again in the tranquil sitting-room, all cosily round the fire, with the lights soft and the fire an enormous red glow. Patricia was very subdued. She was happy and unhappy at the same time. The contrast of this evening, and this quiet fireside, with the previous evening's hot and tempting excitement, was impressive; it shook her. She knew that this was in

some way better than the other; she felt herself yielding to it upon the one hand as she had done upon the other to passion; and as she knew and remembered, she became confusedly restless. She wondered if the Maynes always spent their evenings quietly, and in such blessed and unendurable tranquillity.

"I couldn't bear to," she thought, with the tears starting into her eyes. "I'm wicked. I must have excitement. I couldn't stand it. I should scream, and make a dash—like Amy running for the train!"

But as if Claudia had guessed what were Patricia's thoughts, she said:

"This is the first evening Edgar and I have both been at home for about six weeks—seven weeks—except that night when you came to dinner." Patricia sighed wearily, her eyes closing in despair at the sense of guilt which oppressed her. There was a moment's silence. In the middle of it, Claudia rose. "Oh, by the way, Edgar. Patricia's hard up. She wants to ask your advice. I promised you'd help her."

"No, no. I don't . . ." began Patricia, and looked round for support. But Claudia was no longer in the room. The door was closed. She was alone with Edgar, as one imprisoned; and everything Edgar stood for in her mind was hostile to passion and folly and hot-mouthed temptation.

She could not bring herself to meet his glance. She could look no higher than the shoulders of his dark grey tweed suit. His small and well-shaped feet were opposite her own. He lay back in a chair which was the counterpart of the one in which Patricia sat. Edgar, the maker of this home, who breathed restraint and clear understanding and ridicule of emotional recklessness. She was ashamed and tongue-tied. But one grey tweed suit is very like another, and when Edgar spoke she

could not help quickly glancing up, with resentment of his unsusceptibility to the charm which she knew herself to be capable of exercising. He was very brown, and his brown eyes were very honest, and his lips were very clearly and pleasantly moulded, as though he smiled easily. He was smiling now.

"I expect you'd better, hadn't you?" he asked, with perfect gravity and good-humour.

There came into Patricia's heart a trust which was rare, and an irresistible call to candour. It annihilated her resentment, her hostile clinging to the memory of Monty and the fever in her blood which he represented.

"I didn't mean to ask your advice," she said, looking straight at Edgar. "You couldn't advise me. You couldn't understand how I'm placed."

"Of course I couldn't," agreed Edgar. "Unless you'd tell me. Of course, you *could* do that."

"Are you laughing at me?" demanded Patricia, with sharp anger. Then, the question unsolved, she went on. "It's quite true. I'm coming to the end of my money; and I don't know what to do. I'm not making any money just now: only spending it. And I ought to work."

"What sort of work?" asked Edgar. "What can you do?"

The colour filled Patricia's cheeks. She was again ashamed before him, with the same feeling of shackled personality.

"I'm afraid, nothing," she said, speaking at first with a sort of dry impertinence, and afterwards with rather wistful humility. "Nothing that you would regard as anything. I've been writing. I want to write. I think I've got talent. But . . . I'm only a beginner. You see, I was in an office during the War; and I had a little money when my uncle died; and I've sold a few of the things I've written."

"What d'you mean by nothing that I should regard as anything?" inquired Edgar. Patricia remained silent, the colour slowly rising, and her heart frozen. She could not withstand his personality, but she was fighting against its approach to herself. "You want to keep on the life of a woman of leisure!" he proceeded, smiling again. He changed his attitude, sitting more upright in his chair. "It's awfully hard to go back to drudgery."

Patricia's heart leapt—at the thought, and at his affectionate kindness.

"I simply couldn't," she cried breathlessly.

"I'm sure you could. You could do anything you chose." There came from those steady eyes a look that was full of encouragement, of sympathy. To Edgar there was no question. He trusted her. It was he who evoked her quality. Patricia found herself agitated in self-abhorrence.

"O-oh!" she cried, in pain. "If you *knew* . . ." The painful colour again flooded her cheeks.

"Suppose you tell me," begged Edgar.

"No." Patricia stared into the fire, her hands clasped upon the arm of her chair. She was driven to defiance that shocked herself. "I couldn't. And you couldn't understand. There are all sorts of things in my *nature* that you couldn't understand. You . . . you've got a cold will. You don't shrink and waver. You're not impulsive and . . ."

Edgar rose from his chair, his hands in his pockets. He stood looking away from Patricia, as if in deep thought. At last he said:

"Do you resent my will, that you call it cold? Why should you do that? It's unjust. I've no wish but to help you. As a matter of fact, I haven't a cold will. I'm obstinate; and I shrink and waver. But I don't shrink and waver once I've made up my mind. I made

up my mind some time ago that I loved you and wanted to marry you, and to help you; and so there's no more hesitation about *that*."

Patricia was astounded. She turned sharply, her lips parted in amazement. He was in earnest. His words made her heart race. Then anger came—and again shame—and an emotion which she did not analyse.

"Marry? When . . . Don't be ridiculous!" cried Patricia.

Edgar looked down at her, apparently as grave and unmoved as before, although his voice was changed.

"Why not?" he asked. "I'm in love with you. Will you marry me?"

Patricia laughed, almost savagely. She was deeply moved, and her present emotion, in conflict with all she had been feeling so recently, made her voice loud and angry, as if she were afraid.

"Love me . . . I don't feel that you love me," she said with bitterness. "Something quite different. I feel that you're interested in me——"

"Well, I should hope so!" cried Edgar, apparently amazed. "Isn't that essential?"

"And I don't love you," said Patricia, vehemently. "I don't!" She was still emphatically protesting. "I respect you. I think you're . . . I think you're everything that's kind and . . . inhuman." She was trying to remain calm, to equal his restraint with her own; and she was failing. The failure gave her a passionate sense of inferiority to him that was intolerable. Suddenly she began to cry, her hands outstretched helplessly before her. "It's no good . . . It's no good!" she sobbed through her tears, her little face distorted with the torment of her heart. "I'm . . . an awful . . . *beast!*"

Edgar took the outstretched hands in his own, dropping to one knee in order to do so. He was so gentle, so ex-

traordinarily inviting of trust and sincerity and goodness, that Patricia's head came forward for the merest instant, and touched his shoulder, as if there to find relief from her own suffering.

"Do think of it," he urged, his face so near her own, so comprehending, so full of love. "Patricia . . ."

She rose in anguish, beating her hands together.

"You think it's so simple. You think it's a question of talking and persuading. You don't know what love is," she said, in this violent, strangled voice. And then, as if indignantly, she added: "Nor do I! Nor do I! I *couldn't*. I don't know how to love. I'm too much of a beast. I'm too selfish and ugly-hearted! And if you knew anything about my nature you wouldn't *want* to love me. You'd hate me." And with that she began to dry her eyes, staring away from him, and trembling.

"You're so silly to talk of being wicked," Edgar said. "How are you wicked?" A very faint tinge of humour came into his voice at her persistent remorse. "What's your particular form of wickedness? Don't be so vague, my dear. You'd enjoy it more if you *were* thoroughly wicked. Let me help you not to be wicked!"

Patricia made no answer. When he repeated her name she ignored him. In a minute, as if she were trying to be conversational, she went on, still in a dreary, hopeless tone:

"Isn't it funny. I've been coming across . . . all sorts of people's ideas of love . . . lately—both girls and men;—and they're all of them different. They're none of them . . . mine. And I *must* have *my* way of love!"

Edgar was also upon his feet, facing her.

"What is your way of love?" he asked. "It's my way, too. The others aren't love. They're phantasms." But Patricia would not speak. Only a little tearful smile, as at some baffling secret knowledge which he could never

share, played upon her lips and in her eyes. The smile, as well as her silence, provoked his complaint. "There's a sort of sublime cheek about you," said Edgar, wonderingly, "that isn't likely to be equalled. I asked you to marry me. You ramble on about other people's ideas of love. The ideas of other people don't interest me."

"Exactly!" cried Patricia, thrown back into anger and shame and resistance. "That's exactly why nobody could ever possibly love you. You're only interested in your own ideas."

"They're not enough, my dear. I want *your* love."

"I could *never* love you," said Patricia, trying to speak coolly, and remaining unconvincing in her childish emphasis. "I could never love anybody so . . . so bitterly inhuman!"

"Well, won't you try?" he urged, puzzled at her quarrelsomeness and unable to reconcile it with the indifference he had feared. "You like me, don't you?"

Patricia shook her head, unexpectedly.

"No!" she cried. "I *don't* like you. I hate you. I shall always hate you. You make me feel such a cad!"

And with that she left him, going in search of Claudia. Edgar, his heart beating, and his temper ruffled, remained standing as he had stood during the latter part of their interview. He did not see her again that night. She had left the house by the time Claudia returned to the room, and brother and sister averted their eyes from each other at their first encounter.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: PLAYING WITH FIRE

i

PATRICIA made some important discoveries about herself within the next twelve hours. She was sleepless, and her brain was active. She found that all love-stories were entirely wrong, that they were too simple and too prudish. They did not represent her own feelings at all. And the more she tried to discover what her own feelings were, the more bewildered she became. Like so many other matters connected with herself, as to which she had no standards of comparison, her feelings seemed to Patricia to be unique. She was both ashamed and exultant at this.

At first she was too frantically troubled at the position in which she found herself to be anything but exclamatory. Within an amazingly short time she had allowed three men to make love to her, if with certain restrictions; and her sense of purity was horrified at this. There immediately followed, by reaction, some vehement attempts to justify her own conduct. But when she had been hysterical for a little while Patricia became calmer. The calm was even more false than the hysteria. It was in fact a feature of advanced hysteria. She was not equal to the strain which the events of the last few days had created.

"I don't love any of them," she said. "I'm too selfish—too wicked. I don't deserve to be loved. And I'm *not* loved, either. I wanted Harry to adore me. He couldn't! I want Monty . . . he fascinates me. He excites me. I like it, and hate myself for liking it.

He's passionate; he's sensual. And *I'm* passionate; *I'm* sensual. It's the wicked side of me coming out. And I only want Edgar to respect me. Respect!" She gave a hollow little mocking laugh. "He doesn't know me. He doesn't care for me. He couldn't adore me, because he despises me. He couldn't be passionate about me, because he's too cold. He's cold, I tell you. He doesn't know what it is to want somebody *fiercely*. I've got no power over him at all. And I must have power! I *must!*"

ii

Her mind went creeping back to Edgar, with a sort of raging contempt.

"He thinks love's an endless conversation. He thinks it's like paying another person's daily cheque into your own account, and being able to draw cheques to the same amount. It's a transaction. It *isn't*. There's no romance in him. He's business. He'd engage me as a wife as he'd engage a secretary. 'Good post.' A considerate employer! Everything in the day's round—breakfast, love, business . . . I *hate* him! I could never move his judgment. He'd be kind; but he'd never really give in to me. Besides, I don't want to be just a part of a man's life. I wouldn't. I must be the whole of it. I'm too big to be a part of anything. The man I marry must adore me. . . .

"It's strange. I could—I couldn't ever feel any shyness or pride with Edgar. I could tell him anything that came into my head. . . . No, I couldn't. He's intelligent; but he's amused at me. He doesn't take me seriously. That's his limitation. He thinks I'm a funny little insect. If I told him I was wonderful, he'd say, 'In what way?' Fancy trying to live with a man who asks what your ideas of love are! No, he wouldn't . . .

He'd say, quite calmly: 'Yes, I suppose you are. We all are, in our way.' He does everything with his head. He hasn't *got* a heart! He'd think me silly and vain and . . .

"Of course, if I was worn out—a poor, broken dispirited girl who just wanted a home, and food, and if I fitted in with his work, then it would be different. I'm not! I'm young! I want love and life, and other young people . . . and admiration. I want power. And I want to be loved for my beauty . . . as Monty loves me. I want to be desired, as Monty desires me. Edgar *couldn't* feel for me in that way . . . He only cares for himself. . . . For me, perhaps, in a funny way. But only as something secondary to himself.

"I could go on living with Edgar all my life. . . .

"I couldn't live with him at all. I could have lived with Harry, because . . . Harry's stupid. He's obtuse. But he's charming. Edgar's not charming. He doesn't *want* to be. He could be, if he wanted to be. He only wants to be quite honest, quite fair . . . My God! Fancy wanting to be quite fair in love!

"Why is it that I attract these men?" She laughed again, murmuring. She was diverted at her own scorn of her three lovers. Had life nothing better to offer her than a choice between charm and desire and cool affection? It seemed not. And yet on the whole, they were personable. Harry and Monty were handsome. Edgar, if not handsome, was not fantastically ill-looking. He had a good plain clean-cut face, and his hair and eyes and teeth were good. Oh, she admitted that! But she was thinking of them, not as men whom one might notice or fail to notice in the street, but as possible husbands. . . .

Not only as husbands; but as husbands for Patricia Quin!

iii

These thoughts represented her arrogance. There remained her modesty. It did not apply in the case of Harry, because Harry lay, as it were, in the past. And he had not wanted to marry her. Did Monty? Patricia's thought of that was a wild blur. But the secret of her feeling of resentment towards Edgar suddenly emerged once more in the modest mood which now came. She had been able to charm Harry: she both attracted and excited Monty: she did not know what could attract Edgar to herself, since she felt she did not charm him at all. How charm the basilisk? If she tried to charm him he would think her *farouche*.

"He likes the truth. He'd soon find out that there's nothing in me at all. I'm only a shallow, pleasure-loving girl, who's caught his eye because she's pretty and young. That's nothing. Fifty thousand girls would do as much. He'd find me out. There's nothing in me. There's only vanity and . . . and wickedness. He wouldn't like that. He'd be displeased with me for not being wise and good . . . and sensible. . . .

"He's kind. I trust him. . . .

"What on earth am I talking like this for? Anybody would think I wanted to persuade myself to marry him. I don't. I don't love him; and never could love him; and I'll never marry him. He'd bore me. Besides, it's ridiculous. It's not as though I'd asked him to want me. I'm not a beggar—yet. And he doesn't really want to marry me at all. He couldn't care for me.

"I'm inferior to him. I have thoughts and feelings he wouldn't like. I'm full of ugliness and selfishness and wickedness.

"I'm no good. I'm no good to anybody. I'm horrible.

"Not really quite horrible. I'm only a . . . you see, I'm . . . I *am* nice. I *am* good!

"No, I'm no good. I'm no good to anybody. . . ."
There was a long tormented pause. Very low, with a sudden flush of blood to the cheeks, in an almost vicious despair:

"Except Monty. . . ."

iv

There was a letter from Monty lying beside her plate upon the breakfast-table. It said:

"Dear Patricia: Come to dinner—here—to-morrow night ('To-night' when you get this). We'll dine and talk, and perhaps go and dance somewhere. Monty."

"Here" was his own house in South Hampstead. Patricia read the note as a command, and her brows were raised. Then she re-read it as an appeal. Her heart began to beat a little faster. For the first time she was repelled by the warning sense of danger. It was in a mood entirely reckless that she threw the letter aside, determined to go. The hardness was again in her eyes. It was as though she had snapped her fingers at Edgar; but her heart was heavy, and the curve of her lips was that of shame and defiance.

v

Monty sat in the studio waiting for his visitor. Those hangings which had supplied such barbaric decoration upon the night of the September party had been replaced. The whole studio was filled with colour, blazing from wall to wall. And Monty sat in sombre Napoleonic

gloom amid the marvels of his invention. His face gave no sign of the slow and melancholy thoughts which were passing steadily, processionally, before his concentrated attention. Monty never hurried. He always saw his way clear before taking any step. He had a slow, fatalistic patience which was almost always rewarded.

For weeks now Monty had thought that Patricia Quin was desirable. He had seen her first at his own party in September, and since then upon many occasions. He had looked at her at first, speculating, with the cool observation of a connoisseur. There was much grace, much wilfulness: her movements were delightful, and the play of her light emotions full of singular interest. For a little while Monty had wondered how innocent she really might be; for he appreciated freshness as much as any traditional roué could have done, and he disliked what was callow. His experience of women also made him suspicious of the assumption of purity in such young women as interested him. One of Monty's precepts had been "You cannot shock a woman." It revealed in him a standpoint already fixed.

As he had seen Patricia his interest in her had grown. She amused him by her confidence, her ignorance; she was fresh, and she had spirit. Moreover, when he thought of her, Monty had the air of one grimly smiling. Spirit in a young girl entertained him: it could be played with, and tormented. With its positive effects upon those less sophisticated than himself he had no concern. For Monty it had no positive effects, since he was entirely impervious to the behavior of others where his own determination was engaged. Such a spirit would be amusing to break. Nothing more. Even as he thought that, Monty had an increased stolidity of air. But his interest was not only in her spirit, which was probably the mark of unstable will. Patricia seemed to him in every

way delectable. She was unspoilt; she was to be won by flattery; she was to be kept by insolence.

Nevertheless, Monty did not under-rate the address which might be required in winning Patricia. He had dealt previously with young women who were without experience of love. He foresaw that Patricia would be shy as a doe, ready at a single alarming move to fly. She could be flattered, interested, cajoled, by way of her vanity; but not yet was the moment to be ruthless. That, perhaps, was a part of the game. Patricia could be roused, indulged, enjoyed, slowly punished. At least she must be handled with finesse. Monty calculated his finesse.

A point which alarmed him was that his own interest had grown beyond what he had at first imagined that it would be. He had not been, at any time, wholly cold-blooded in his design. That was not the whole of Monty's nature. He had a slow, rising passion; and it was this which determined his actions in all matters of sex. But he had been surprised to find, especially at their last two meetings, that Patricia's innocence, and her virgin coldness, had moved him to an unexpected degree of desire. Only by the greatest self-control had he refrained from alarming her.

Monty appeared to sleep as he sat in his chair in that barbarically-decorated room with the glass roof. A look of heaviness spread across his face. Slowly his head fell back among the cushions. He was intently listening, and his eyes were closed.

Monty had been right. The noise he had heard had been that made by the bell. An instant later the studio door opened and Patricia appeared, demure, even roguish, but pale and, as he immediately saw, in a state of over-strained nerves which signalled caution. She was alarmed by the sense of danger, in no mood of submis-

sion, but as timid as a wild bird. So much was clear even from her glance round the empty studio, the involuntary sway of recoil which marked her realisation of its emptiness.

"Hullo!" cried Patricia, in greeting. "Am I the first?"

"You're the most welcome," Monty assured her. "Come and sit down. What a cold hand! Is it so very cold out?"

"Freezing," Patricia assured him. "And it's a horrid journey, you know."

"How stupid of me!" murmured Monty. "Yes, that's very stupid. I'm so sorry. It's unpardonable of me."

"Never mind. It's really quite all right. Who else is coming?" she asked, eagerly. "Not that I need anybody else, of course." The quick addition was a conscious attempt to placate him, the result of an effort to seem more experienced than in fact she was. It did not deceive Monty.

"That's so kind," he answered. "To dinner—nobody. I thought you wouldn't mind just ourselves. But afterwards there are several people—Felix, and . . . oh, I forget. Rudge and Cynthia Blent and Mackinnon and Timothy Webster. Several more. But they won't be here till good and late."

Patricia nodded. Monty had not failed to observe her relief. He felt he had been wise in thus departing from his original intention, and preparing an after-dinner party. His letter had suggested another pastime, as they both knew. Neither commented. It might have been, he thought, a trivial piece of policy; in reality, as Monty instantly saw, it had saved the day. He was perfectly well-aware that otherwise Patricia would have been on edge for the evening.

"Very fortunate," he thought definitely. "Something's been happening to her. Look at the eyes, the

pupils . . . hands. . . . Drawn lips. Not only fear of me . . . Strange. What can it be? It's Greenlees, I suppose; but what? Is she deeper, or stupidly excitable?"

"Dinner is served, sir," said Jacobs, from the doorway.

"Come along!" Monty caught Patricia's arm with an attempted air of gaiety. It was essential him that he should touch her. At that moment his impulse was savagely to embrace her, to force her body against his own, to hold her to him while he kissed ravenously her neck and cheeks and shoulders.

Patricia started at the touch, and there was a warning degree of resistance in her slightly rigid arm.

"I'm so glad you've got the hangings up again in the studio," she said, with attempted ease as they entered the dining-room thus linked and apart. "They make it like a necromancer's consulting room."

vii

"And supposing myself to be the necromancer," said Monty, across the table, "how would you wish to consult me?"

Patricia unfolded her napkin before answering, and looked round the dining room. The ceiling and walls were dim, because the room was lighted only by half-a-dozen candles set upon the table. The table itself had been made as small as possible, a perfect circle, and was not covered with a cloth. The candles within their decorated orange shades gave a mellow glow. She could see directly across the table to Monty, hardly three feet away, and soup was served the instant she was seated. Jacobs, having served the soup, retired from the room to await a summons.

"I should wish to consult you . . . oh, upon a great number of things," evasively answered Patricia.

"As for instance?"

She smiled, looking quickly round, as if with a sinking heart.

"I don't strictly know what a necromancer is; but supposing him to be a seer of the future, I should like to know . . . I should like to know . . ." Again Patricia hesitated. Hastily she improvised a substitute for the real problem in her mind. "Do you believe in anything at all?" she asked.

It was strange how tones, however low, were audible in that room. She could hear Monty's rich, caressing, magnetic voice, so soothingly quiet, as if it came from beside her.

"What would you like me to believe in?" he begged. "In Progress, or Faith, or the future of England and the Arts? In Beauty and Goodness? In yourself?"

"In honesty, for example. In truth."

"My dear Patricia, you shock me," protested Monty. "I have the greatest respect for truth, and of course for honesty."

"Have you any familiarity with either?" She could see that he would not talk seriously; and she presently was glad that he would not do so. She had wanted answers to other questions, and not to those she had put. The other questions it would have been impossible to ask.

"Patricia, I find that truth and honesty are supposed to be dull—so commonplace as to shock even those who seem to be unable to invent any satisfactory substitutes. 'Let us,' says the life-weary dweller in this district, 'let us read something and see something at the theatre which will take us away from the sordid truth of every-day life.' And yet, I have never seen truth. I believe I shouldn't know it if I saw it. 'What is truth?' asked

jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer. He might have waited until the last trump. As for honesty, it's an appanage of truth, another romantic illusion. If you had asked me if I believed in Beauty, or Goodness, or in yourself, I should have said that the terms were indistinguishable."

"That would have been ample answer to my question about honesty," said Patricia. "I don't think I shall ask more questions of the necromancer. He seems to me rather specious." Nevertheless, Monty's elaborate reply to her false question had increased her composure. She was almost at ease, but still there was something to Monty not quite comprehensible in her ever so faintly agitated manner. "Won't you . . . won't you tell me something about Carthage, please, or Egypt, or the Desert . . ." she asked.

"The desert," said Monty, musingly. "Yes, the desert. . . ."

viii

He described to the wondering Patricia the Nile as he had seen it, and how it takes its rise in the mountains, and how at first the river is red and then green because of the flood of the Blue Nile, and how the flood of the White Nile comes later, so that the banks are covered and the surrounding country is inundated with rich fertilising mud. He described the desert, and repeated that short poem of Shelley's about the King Ozymandias. He told her of the sounds and colours of the East, of all those things which as a traveller he had seen and experienced. He pictured the crowds of the Bazaar, the contrasts, always keeping to familiar things of which she might have read, for the sake of reawakening past imagination and past emotion, which would be so potent in colouring her present mood. And all the time he was

speaking in that slow magic-creating voice of sweetness. Monty's eyes never once left Patricia, but continued to absorb her fairness and her purity, as though he could never cease from desiring her more than anything upon earth or beyond life itself.

So given were they both to this scene that the food before them was eaten mechanically, and the wine they drank insensibly was making them more intimate and more at the mercy of the hour; and Patricia hardly knew that she was eating and drinking, so much was she in a dream. And in the dream she was haunted by the sense that she would awaken, that fierce, cruel birds of prey were tearing her heart, that never again would she know tranquillity or ease of spirit. And Monty was watching her still, with eyes that yielded nothing and took everything, while he sought only to maintain the power which he was achieving by the effect of his story upon her imagination. To Monty all the marvel of which he spoke was familiar. He was unmoved by it. Patricia's beauty, and that alone, was the cause of his unrelaxing attentiveness, the creeping white heat of his feeling, which grew each moment more fierce, more concentrated, more difficult to keep within his own power. He was moved so vehemently that his eyes were glowing. Into his face had stolen that look of greedy sensual heaviness which his passion created. His voice was lower, and the softness had given place to a dryer tone, still caressing, still full of unknown music, but deeper and less smooth. His lips were apart, showing his white teeth. His hands upon the table were rigid.


And something made Patricia look suddenly at Monty, when his expression was unguarded; and she had this clear understanding of his nature and his attitude to herself. Again she had the sensation which had come to her at night after they had parted; of blood which rose

to her cheeks and shoulders, which in its recession made her body burn. It was with fear, a fear which made a shrill cry of protest, of agony, difficult to repress, that she slightly shrank. The colour faded from her cheeks. It was succeeded by deadly pallor, and a trembling such as she could never previously have known.

ix

After the dinner was finished, they went back to the studio for coffee; but the picture of the East was forgotten, and to both of them it was the moment alone that was the secret preoccupation. Patricia sat upon a low seat near the fire, and smoked a cigarette; and they spoke of other things without conviction, and without more than a pretence of interest or intimacy. And when Monty would again have engaged her with pictures of travel she was steadfast in refusal to yield herself. There was a chasm between them. He could see that she had taken fright. He was once more adroitly soothing—talked of the furnishings of his studio, and, indicating each, said how he had acquired it, and with what pure cunning—talked not very light-hearted nonsense about the people who were coming later in the evening—talked of pictures and music, of mountains and lakes and seas—everything to reassure her and restore her ease. But all the time Patricia could remember that glow in his eyes to which she had awakened at the table; and she shrank back, uncontrollably, filled with vehement dread, shocked with the sense of these impenetrable hangings, the dreadful silence beyond the closed door.

And Monty could not continue to control himself with the same coolness. With every effort to maintain the earlier calm, he was driven by urgent necessity to approach her more nearly. Still he did not touch her; but



his manifestly exercised restraint was betrayed in every tone. The colours of those barbaric curtains and chairs began for Patricia to merge and swim together. And Monty was no longer a man; he became some diabolical and terrifying figure, dark, sinister, grotesque. She was afraid—not now of herself, as she had been, but solely of him. She was cooler now, but watchful, still half-fascinated, but as one on edge in face of danger. Monty was laughing and speaking of the dancing which they had amusedly noticed at their last visit to Topping's; of Jacky Dean; of the crowd; of other clubs. He imitated Jacky's devoted, colourless style, which moved him to great mirth, prolonged until it began to jar. And at last he said:

"Have you seen the new steps? Look. . . ." As he spoke, he began dancing alone in the middle of the brilliant studio, a black figure of grace, his head turned from her so that she should not see the colour of his cheeks and the ferocity of his eyes; while Patricia watched the movement of his feet and the poise of his body. "See? Ta-ta-tum-ta . . . Two steps . . . it's a variation of the Tango, of course, very much simplified; but it's rather deceptive. Try it. . . ."

He approached her, his hands outstretched. With a heart of water, Patricia rose, half-protesting. Their hands met, their heads were level. And as Monty held her so he increased and strengthened his hold until with suddenly uncontrollable passion he was savagely pressing her to him and with fury advancing his face so that he might command her lips. His whole body was rigid. The muscles of his arms were like iron to her tender flesh. Patricia did not scream. She could not have done so. Both were desperately silent except for their heavy breathing. She withdrew her head to the greatest distance that Monty's cruel hold allowed, until she was


suffocating. One hand was tightly pressed to Monty's side between his body and her own, and was useless. The other remained. With all her hysterical strength she used it to push away that dark, insistent face. Patricia's strength at the moment of stress was so abnormal that, suddenly exerted so very little more, it might have been sufficient to dislocate his neck. It was for an instant only. They were struggling no more. Monty released her, and they drew apart, panting. Red marks were beneath Monty's chin. Patricia felt bruised, as she might have done if she had been severely beaten with a stick. She was shuddering.

"I'm sorry, Patricia," Monty said, harshly. "I beg your pardon. It was too much for me." The two of them turned away from each other, Monty breathing rapidly, Patricia still almost stifled. "Did I hurt you? Poor child! I was brutal. I'm sorry. . . ."

With her heart seeming to beat in her throat, Patricia nodded slowly.

"My fault," she said, indistinctly. "I ought. . . ."

Both, if it had not been for breathlessness and dishevelment, were treating the situation with strange coolness, as if all heat had evaporated from it. Patricia had no fear. She knew that the embrace could not be repeated. It was as though the fire which had burned in Monty had been extinguished. He stood before her, recovering his normal address, the heaviness gone from his face, and the fury from his eyes. Already he was slipping back into that slow thick courtesy of manner which had been so attractive. Quite soon he would be debonair, perfectly at ease. And she herself, incapable of thought, and in a state of physical agitation though she was, became apparently composed. But even as Patricia felt this, she was overcome by deadly sickness. Her pallor was increased. She groped her way to the fireplace,



resting her head against the cool mantelpiece in an effort to recover. And as she stood thus, only half-conscious, there came a sound which made Monty start. He gave an exclamation, and turned quickly. At first his hands went to his neck, instinctively to the spot where he might bear marks of the struggle. Then, from a sharp glance, with similar intent, at Patricia, he discovered her fainting condition.

"Good God, you're ill!" he cried. "That's the bell. They'll be coming now. Drink this. For God's sake don't let them see . . ."

As he spoke he moved quickly across the studio to a cupboard, from which he produced and brought to her side a decanter and glass. Again Patricia nodded, taking the glass from his hand, and sitting once more upon her low chair, and drinking the brandy. It made her cough. In the midst of her coughing the studio door opened and a merry group of newcomers, all peeping and laughing, appeared without.

They gave universal shouts of greeting, and proclaimed envy of anybody caught with a brandy-glass in her hand, and made general uproar. And in doing so the crowd pushed its way into the studio and its members scattered.

"Hul-lo!" they jovially cried. "Caught you, Patricia! Leading an inebriate's life, I see . . . Greedy! Oh!"

Patricia, laughing, waved the glass in acknowledgment; but it was poor laughter, and was fortunately unheard amid the louder noises of the careless people who had brought their own gaiety.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE VISITOR

i

THE noise which the others made, as fresh arrivals increased their numbers, enabled Monty to return to Patricia's side. She could see a whiteness even in Monty's cheeks when he was quite close to her, and her aversion to him died. Quickly her heart told her that he too was suffering.

"How are you feeling? Would you care to lie down? Shall I get you a taxi? I can't get rid of these people yet. If you'll lie down, I'll take you home later."

"I'll go soon," she whispered back, touched by his subdued tone. "Don't worry. I'm all right. I'm better. I'll go presently, when I feel able. I'll just slip out."

"I'm so sorry," he repeated. "Look here, I must see you before you go."

At that her nerves again raised protest. A deep shudder shook her.

"I'd rather not," she said, in the same low voice. "I couldn't stand any more . . . excitement to-night."

"I *must* see you," he said. "You mustn't go without giving me five minutes."

And at that moment there was a loud call for him from the other end of the studio, and Monty left Patricia. She continued to sit quite still, while the brandy began slowly to have its effect. The blood stole back to her cheeks. She looked at her little hands, which lay together, clenched, in her lap, and slowly unclenched them, so that the knuckles were no longer white. The nails had

left two or three pink marks in her palms, which gradually disappeared. The shuddering left her body, which was now quite inert. A dreadful sensation of staleness pervaded Patricia. Her head ached. Quietly, and as if by accident, Monty was near her again. He poured a little more brandy into her glass.

"Patricia's not very grand," she heard him whisper to another man. "See that she drinks this, will you?"

The other man, a stranger, drew up his chair, and sat near her, talking in a low voice while she drank the brandy. She could not understand what he said, but his voice was grateful. She smiled her thanks at him, and her attention wandered away to the groups in other parts of the studio, so loud, so closely resembling in appearance the groups which had been present on the occasion of her first visit to this studio.

So much had happened since that evening that she realised how changed she now was. It seemed to Patricia that she must have been a child then. She felt very old now, as if she were looking back, an old woman, upon days of happy ignorance. The noise did not echo sweetly in her ears as it had done. This was no longer an enchanted meeting-place for those who were wise and wonderful and superior to the rest of all human beings. She had seen so much, and felt so much, since she had first known them, that the staleness which had come upon her this evening was diffused among the visitors. She felt them to be also stale, curious automata chattering to hide their emptiness and unhappiness, as she too might now chatter to combat the knowledge that she was weary and unable any longer to experience simple things with her old fresh delight.

A sigh shook Patricia. The feeling of sickness remained with her. And this stranger who tried vainly to distract her attention with idle speeches about things she

did not understand and did not want to understand was no other than the rest. She could see his long hair and hear his thin light voice; and she was stirred by a contempt for all that these groups represented. But her contempt no longer arose from a sense that she was superior to the groups. For the first time she was sick at heart as well as in mind and body. She made no attempt to listen. She only felt tired and filled with distaste and the longing for quietude and sincerity. The crowd became vague. At first Patricia thought that she was again in danger of fainting; but she was immediately better, and able at last to hear what the man said. He was talking about the theatre, and was describing a play he had seen.

"Perfectly ghastly . . ." he was saying. "And all these suburbans were enjoying it with all their ears. A silly little fool of a girl, supposed to be extraordinarily charming; and saying and doing the most incredible things. . . ."

ii

Patricia could never have understood that it was her state of mind alone which made these people distasteful to her. Any other crowd would have seemed equally empty and unprofitable. But she was sitting amid the noise sobered by her late excitement; and her reactions were so rapid that she was misconstruing a mood as a revelation. As she had hitherto overvalued herself, and then, by the mere plunge of her neuroticism, had undervalued every quality she had, she now felt aghast at the results of her own unreasoning wilfulness. She saw herself as a feather, tossed by every wind of inclination, veering, flying, without will. She was deeply shocked.

She thought of Harry; of Monty; of Edgar; and she was ashamed. There was no indignation towards Monty;

only acid shame. She had been fascinated, tempted; she had been flattered and excited; and her vanity had betrayed her. When the reality had come she had awakened to the understanding that this fascinating sport with fire was a horror to her. She, who had thought herself so clever, and so experienced, was appalled at the very thing which she had supposed so fascinating. She felt like the little boy who coveted one of those big glass jars full of coloured liquid which still stand in the windows of small pharmacies; and who, when the water had been emptied, found himself possessed of a jar without beauty. Nothing could have been more bitter than the realisation that she was a fool who had not even the courage to pursue her folly to its end.

Patricia had played with the idea of love for Harry; and it had been shown to be empty. She hardly thought of him. Lightly, she had fallen in love with love. And then, tempted, she had enjoyed her sense of power over Monty. She had responded to him, encouraged him; and the result had been this evening's ignominious struggle. The bruises she had received had been not only those of the body; they had been bruises of her self-esteem, of the immaculate legend of Patricia Quin.

Subdued, miserable, she accepted her mortification.

"I've had my lesson!" she thought. And then, with a rising of that fear which she had thought to allay by means of excitement, she exclaimed: "But what in the world am I to do?"

iii

It was to Patricia an appalling moment of realisation. She fell into a kind of stupor, a dream in which all things appeared to her in a clear light of understanding, in which facts which hitherto she had not truly perceived were made apparent. She was not asleep, but she was so

absorbed in contemplation that all noise made an under-song to her reverie.

"I've been too clever," she thought. "I shall always be too clever for myself, too big for my boots. All my life. I shall go on and on, thinking myself so marvellous, until I come up against . . . what? How am I marvellous at all? What have I ever done that I should consider myself marvellous? Nothing!" It was a terrible confession. If she had been alone she must have screamed. But she was not alone. She was in this wildly-coloured room, where each thing had been brought and placed by some inner certainty of judgment on Monty's part, until the whole room was a sort of picture of his mind; and there were others laughing and talking within a few yards of her. And as Patricia remembered that this piece of stuff had been brought from that place, and this other given by some friend, and a lacquered chest discovered in a small shop in Dublin, and a bronze figure . . . she could not prevent herself from thinking that Monty was much more wonderful than she would ever be, much more wonderful, perhaps, than she had ever imagined. She saw him among his guests, ever and anon glancing to make sure that she was still there, that she was better; and Patricia knew that in culture and acquaintance with all beautiful and sophisticated things he had wisdom that she would never attain. This whole house was filled with his personality, filled with his taste and his knowledge, his love of rare things and those that were rich in colour and florid in design. His interests were innumerable. He could talk of all the arts as only one who was a connoisseur in each could talk. His sensitiveness to these arts, so coolly displayed, was due not only to spontaneous outgoing to whatever was sightly but to the gift which enabled him to appraise its quality, and that degree of precision to the artist's con-

cept to which a work of art owes its singularity and therefore its permanence. He was not a child, exclaiming at a toy: he was the product of a civilisation, of many civilisations. His merest words were charged with references and associations of which Patricia must for ever remain ignorant. And with all this knowledge, all this culture, Monty was at bottom the crude animal she had discovered. He had wanted her as an animal wants another animal of the same species. And Patricia had opposed her will to his, her instinctive doctrine of life to Monty's. Well?

Harry Greenlees had nothing like Monty's culture. In Monty's sense he was not even educated. But even Harry was better-instructed and more positive than herself. He was an individual; he could stand alone; whereas Patricia only tried to do so, and made a tremendous fuss about standing alone. Harry was physically as charming as herself. He was lively, beautiful, able to do many unexpected things which were outside the needs of his daily life. He could spend whole days alone without monotony, which in itself was testimony to his endowment. He could tell all the wild flowers of Europe in their seasons; without pretending to be a musician he could play the piano well enough to be mistaken by the unlearned for a professional; and without pretending to be an artist he could draw with a certain cunning. And he was a competent journalist, a specialist in his own department, rough and ready in diction, but capable and individual in style. His technical acquaintance with all sports was considerable. In his own way Harry also was a connoisseur. He had a devotion to sport and sportsmanship, and a code which related itself to the sporting code; and his sureness of judgment in everything sporting was that of a good critic. And at bottom Harry was just a rolling stone, wandering about the

world for the fun of it; and he had wanted Patricia for his chum, to roll about the world with him for a space, until one or other of them was tired of the exploit. And Patricia had refused to roll about the world, because she imagined that she had a nobler destiny. Well?

Edgar was a man who by the strict disciplining of his natural capacity had done what came first to his hand. He had learnt the details of a business which had been distasteful to him; and he had mastered them. He had made money, he had travelled, he had created a microcosm for his family, in which they moved graciously and comfortably. The whole of his business was at the tips of his fingers; his reading was considerable, and his understanding enormous. She had never yet found Edgar betraying by a false note any failure to comprehend the essential qualities of a subject or its intricacies. His mind was so trained that he unerringly caught secondary meanings, and those which were implicit. He spoke without any air of authority; but she knew that he was reckoned wise even among men of greater accomplishments. And Edgar had offered her help and love; and Patricia had clung to her own path of folly. What had she to put against this weight of challenge? If she insisted upon her personality, in what way was the intrinsic value of this personality made manifest to the impressible world?

Soberly Patricia faced the challenge, shrinking from it. She was a pretty girl; she had high spirits, cleverness of wit and tongue; an extraordinary sense of the possibilities of her own talent. And she was essentially a woman. It was because of her sex that she was at a disadvantage in her power to experience active life; but it was also because of her sex, and not because she could command equality of knowledge or understanding with them, that these three men sought her and desired her.

If she had refused all of them it was because either she thought none of them was worthy of her love; or because she had such confidence in her own individuality that she preferred to go forward alone. That is, because she thought that the gift she had for the world was greater than the gift which these men desired of her. Was it that she proposed to remain unmarried, to ignore love? Her response to Harry and Monty had proved that this was not so. She could not stand alone. Patricia shrank from the knowledge; but it was forced upon her in her present mood. And presently she made, aside from all these specious exaggerations of the value of knowledge for its own sake, a genuine discovery.

To the question which rebelliously she put to her own challenge, "Why should they be so much . . . more learned . . . than I?" came an answer which was a revelation. It was unwelcome. She disliked it, and presently would fall upon her own intuition and perhaps destroy it. But for the moment it was valid. Patricia was not incapable of such flights of intuition, and—as she did now—she generally over-valued them as truths. The answer which she received from herself in the course of this singular vision was: "Because they are all interested in something else besides themselves."

She awoke from her dream to find that the party was still in progress; and that the man beside her was still speaking with unabated zest of the theatre, which seems to be an unrivalled subject for monologue. With a yawn, Patricia saw that the whole of her analysis had passed within a few minutes. Nevertheless she remembered it very clearly; and she was still, as the result of her intellectual pilgrimage, very serious.

iv

It is one thing to receive such an inspiration as this, however, and it is quite another to believe it. To believe it, that is, as one believes in such things as breakfast, or to-morrow, or relativity. Consequently Patricia felt already a little vague. She was not satisfied even with her inspiration, though it had descended in a dream. She knew that it was a feminine intuition, and feminine intuitions, however acute, are as the interpretations of the stars or the palm or the tealeaf—never so remarkable or so celebrated as when they are confirmed. And as she coned her problem, Patricia had a very singular notion. She found herself thinking:

"I shall ask Edgar."

She was astounded at herself. She almost begged herself to repeat something half-heard which had seemed incredible. "Oh, I couldn't ask him!" she said, as if in answer, "I shan't see him again. Of course I shall see him again. How absurd! I mustn't be silly. He's my friend." And with that a low small laugh escaped her lips. Her thoughts strayed into a fresh vein. She wondered what would have happened if the others had not come into the studio, if Monty and she had still been alone there. She knew that she would not still have been in the studio at all, since she would have been driven to leave the house long before. And her mind leapt back to that suggestion about Edgar. Again she had that consciousness of refuge in him. "I should have . . . I should have . . ." Then, very quietly indeed, but also with conclusive sharpness: "I couldn't. . . ."

If only one could do things as they came into one's head, all the same, how easy life would be!

Patricia sighed. She interrupted the young theatrical enthusiast, who was talking about societies which were

being formed in all the villages in England for the performance of Euripides in Gilbert Murray's translation.

"What nonsense!" she said, still only half-attentive to what her new friend was saying, and without conscious rudeness. "I'm going home now. Thank you very much for looking after me. I'm quite well again."

And with that she rose and went quickly to the door of the studio.

Monty followed.

v

He made no attempt to conceal his pursuit from the other guests. He was too obviously afraid that Patricia might slip out of the house, and so escape him. And the urgency of his desire to speak with her was extreme. He arrived in the hall just as she disappeared into the room where her hat and coat had been left; and Monty waited there in the dimmed light, a sombre figure, with his head lowered and his broad shoulders bowed. To Patricia, emerging, he was like an emissary of the Inquisition, so appalling, even to her expectant eye, was his appearance. She lifted her own shoulders with a slight brusqueness, her head high, and her breath rapid.

"Good-night," said Patricia, quickly. She moved towards the front door.

"Not yet." It was an appeal, a deep whisper.

"No, no. I'm going."

"I must see you—speak to you—for an instant. Patricia . . ."

Monty had interposed himself in order that she might not reach the door without touching him, and as Patricia could not have borne this contact she was checked instantly. She stood, hesitant; and then with bowed head followed the direction of his entreating arm and stepped into the room at the farther side of the hall. It was the

amber-hued drawing-room in which Edgar had seen Monty a few evenings previously, a lofty room which the electric light caused to become faintly and alluringly luminous. There was a fire, and the room was warm; but Patricia was shivering a little as she stood a short distance from the door, facing him. Monty followed her into the room, closing the door.

"Won't you come over to the fire?" he said in his gentlest tone. "I can't let you go like this without a word."

Still that careful modulation, still the raised note at the end of the sentence! She went nearer to the fire, and Monty stood near her, by the table.

"Aren't you going to forgive me?" he asked, suddenly. His manner was slightly changed. A familiarity had entered it, as though they had a secret understanding; but he was still bearing himself with soft respect. Nevertheless, beneath his humility there was ironic contempt for her sex which betrayed him.

Patricia started at the tone, at the discovery. The tears came to her eyes. She felt she had no use at all for such false contrition as he was prepared to display. It was not forgiveness Monty desired. He was deliberately pandering to a mentality which his sensual cynicism led him to despise. Having, apparently, no belief in purity in women, he was prepared elaborately to connive at its cunning or hysterical assumption and to submit to its merely formal placation. He was the diplomat, playing a familiar game, bargaining with vanity; not a penitent. And to Patricia such insolent flattery was more offensive than a brazen making-light of the episode would have been.

"Don't talk like that, Monty," she begged. "It isn't forgiveness you need; and you know it. I can't talk about forgiving. Surely you see that."

"I want you to believe that in asking you here—" began Monty, cajolingly, still with that cringing air which masked watchfulness for any sign of emotion or relenting.

Patricia laughed—uncontrollably.

"Oh, Monty!" she exclaimed; and there were still tears in her voice at the knowledge that he held her to be simply a common piece of woman's flesh, to be won still, so long as he sacrificed to her false delicacy, assumed, perhaps, for the sake of bargaining.

"It's true," he persisted, with more energy. Patricia turned aside, weary of the encounter, sickened at his cynical insincerity.

"I've told you I don't want to talk about forgiveness," she said. "I couldn't forgive you, because there's no question of that. It's myself that I can't forgive. It was idiotic of me to try and play a game I'm not fitted for, and I'm ashamed of myself. Isn't that enough?"

"Then you'll come again?" he questioned, as if puzzled.

"No," she said. "I've had my lesson. I've been silly and wicked; but you've been worse. And you're still being worse, you know. You're under-rating me. You think I'm pretending. You think you've only got to flatter me to find I'm no better than . . . the rest—I suppose." She shrugged. "I'm not pretending. I'm going."

"I love you," Monty told her. "You were surprised. You were shocked. . . ." He was still persisting in his former attitude because his imagination was not quick enough to anticipate the changes of this chameleon. But he was admiring her perhaps more than he had already done, and finding her still very desirable.

"I was horrified," Patricia said slowly. "But we're not talking about the same thing." She was very serious now. And the fact that she was serious made her again

baffling to Monty, who had expected tears or reproaches or formal forgiveness, and was trying to discover some new point of contact which would at least gain time. Given time, he thought he was always assured of victory; but he was in a difficulty. She had changed, slipping out of his power to dominate her; and he had not the key to the change, for that lay in Patricia's singular vision.

"We're talking about . . ."

"No," said Patricia. "I came here in a reckless state, because I'd been very miserable; and you asked me to come because you wanted to make love to me."

"And I frightened you," said Monty quickly. "Poor little girl!"

"You did me a lot of good," answered Patricia. "You shocked me into my senses."

Monty stared at her, his dark eyes glowing, and his face once more alight with admiration. She saw him moisten his lips, and saw his hands clenched by his sides. But also, from another point altogether, she heard a faint incomprehensible sound. At once she strained her ears; but Monty had heard no sound, and continued to stare at her. The sound Patricia thought she had heard was a tiny crunching of gravel outside the house. She stared back at Monty, her nerves quivering. Dread was back in her heart.

"There's nothing to fear," said Monty, in his level voice of reassurance. "I'm not going to lose my head again as I did early in the evening. I beg your pardon for that." Patricia bowed her head again in acknowledgment of his apology; but she was no longer heeding his tactical advances. As he spoke, her eyes were glancing from Monty to the window. She looked so slim and fair, with the golden light of the room evoking the gold in her hair and the delicate gleam of colour in her cheeks, that Monty was moved anew as he had been earlier in

the evening. He was engrossed in her, his eyes avid and his excitement intense. "By God, you know, you're beautiful, Patricia," he whispered. "Look here, we'll go together to the East, and you shall see all those wonders for yourself." She did not seem to be listening. Monty played his trump card. "We'll be married, d'you see, and go straight to the East together; and you shall have . . ."

In his eagerness, Monty came towards her, his hands outstretched. He was continuing, with increasing vehemence, when Patricia interrupted him. She would have cried out that what he offered was unthinkable, but, as she made the effort to speak, her eyes were caught by something that stifled the words. She could only stand there, looking beyond Monty, to the doorway, her lips parted as if in the act of speech, her body rigid with amazement. For there, just within the room, silhouetted against the golden door, was another person—a woman, heavily cloaked, with the hood of her dark cloak shrouding her face, a woman who had heard the last speech as she swiftly and silently opened the door, and who stood perfectly white, as if she were stone. Within the fold of the hood Patricia saw two glittering eyes. All else was white, ghastly.

"Really!" said the woman, in a breathless tone, as if she were stricken with illness. "Monty!"

It was Blanche Tallentyre.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: BLANCHE

i

SHE had seemed haggard when first Patricia had noticed her at the September party, and again upon their second meeting; but now, in that light, hooded, and in extremity of emotion, Blanche was a picture of unhappiness such as Patricia had never known. The long line of her face was sharply cut by the edge of the dark hood; her lips were a piteous thin gash of brilliance, almost like a new cut; her eyes were black diamonds. She stood within the room, pressed back against the door, listening and watching, her bleak glance entirely for Monty.

There was an instant's silence after her anguished cry. Monty's outstretched hands fell once more to his side. Patricia did not move: she was too horrified to do so. During that instant, when even the studio revelry was ignored, the hearts of all three might have stopped beating for all the motion visible. Then Patricia saw that Blanche's low breast was rising and falling very quickly, and the dark cloak fell away from her neck and showed the hollows at the base of Blanche's throat. But Blanche paid no heed. She was entirely absorbed in the moment. Only when Monty moved ever so little towards her did she speak.

"I didn't expect to find anybody here," Blanche said, hoarsely. "I didn't expect to find you . . ." She hesitated, and with a sort of dreary sarcasm completed her sentence, ". . . making a proposal of marriage. It

seems rather odd. I didn't . . . expect it. I wonder if you quite mean it. . . ."

Monty said to Patricia:

"We're interrupted, you see." His shoulders were a little raised; but his face gave no sign of whatever emotion he might be feeling. With the emergency, he had slipped back into that unreadable air of reserve which at first had been for Patricia such a strong attraction. It showed, she now knew, as much caution as self-control; but the silent person in a quarrel is always at an advantage. His head was sunk upon his shoulders, and the heavy outline of his jaw was projected, as though his teeth were firmly clenched.

"I see we're interrupted." Patricia took two or three steps towards the door. She was still in a state of suppressed excitement, and was half blind with the continued emotional tension. "Mrs. Tallentyre," she said, impulsively. "Monty didn't quite mean his proposal of marriage; but if he had meant it I shouldn't have . . . taken it seriously. How d'you do?"

For the first time Blanche took notice of Patricia. She turned her eyes from Monty and looked from Patricia's head to her feet, as if with intent deliberately to ignore her. When she spoke again her eyes were averted.

"What are you doing here?" she asked coldly. She was imperious, like a mistress who has discovered a servant in the act of prying.

"Monty has a party," answer Patricia, trying to control her excitement and to speak in an ordinary tone. "But I don't understand what . . . What is it to do with you?" In spite of her effort, and perhaps because of it, she found herself trembling with anger. "I don't understand you."

Blanche sneered. A look of contempt passed across her face. The bitter, anxious eyes darted at Patricia a quick glance of scorn.

"You're impertinent!" she cried, and was again as if frozen.

"No, Blanche. This is really intolerable, you know," put in Monty, anger in his own contemptuous tone. "We're not at the Lyceum now. Patricia is here as my guest."

"And you are proposing to her. I interrupted you. I'm sorry." Blanche gave a brusque laugh. But she did not move from her position at the door.

"And now I'm going," said Patricia. She made as if to do so, but looked from one to the other of them in uncertainty that was not without indignation. Her heart was fluttering.

"No. You asked what right I had to . . ." Blanche moved her arm stiffly, and Patricia saw its wretched thinness, and the ugly bone at the elbow. "Of course, I haven't any right . . ."

"You really mustn't make a scene, my dear Blanche," interposed Monty. "It's quite out of the piece, so to speak. You interrupted a conversation . . ."

"I came, because I wanted to see you, Monty," said Blanche. "But the conversation I interrupted concerns me very vitally. Miss Quin, you may not be to blame. I can't tell. It's all so . . . peculiar. You're only a vain little fool, of course. But Monty has no right to offer you marriage."

"I can assure you," answered Patricia, with undesignedly offensive coolness which arose from her fear and her effort at self-control, "that that doesn't in the least matter."

"And now, good-night, Patricia. I'll see you to the door," said Monty,

"No!" Blanche pressed back. "Miss Quin: Monty and I have quarrelled. We quarrelled here a fortnight ago, and he has not answered my letters——"

"My dear Blanche! The story of our quarrel——" Monty approached, seizing Blanche's arm. He could quite easily have torn her from the door and made way for Patricia, and that was clearly his object. His hand was to her elbow, and Blanche was already bent to exert her strength in resistance. But as Monty's grip tightened, she said in a very low tone:

"Do you want me to scream, and bring the others? Then let go my arm."

Patricia's saw Monty's teeth bared, his left fist clenched. And then he stood back a little way.

"You're doing yourself no good, you know," he said presently, in his caressing voice. "Only harm. Poor fool that you are."

"Miss Quin——"

Patricia spoke entreatingly. She went closer to Blanche, her voice low and her hands appealing.

"Mrs. Tallentyre, is there any *need* for me to hear? I was going when you came: my one wish is to go now. You're mistaken in me. You needn't have any thought——"

"Please let me tell you. For a fortnight I have been ill. I have written to Monty, and he has not answered my letters. This afternoon I received, without a letter, a thousand pounds in bank-notes. From Monty, you understand. A thousand pounds. It was my solatium. I was to take the thousand pounds, and—good-bye! You understand that, also? You're very quick."

During all this time, Monty stood with his back turned to Blanche, and his hands in his pockets. He appeared not to be listening, but to be thinking of another matter. Such disregard was to be expected of him; but at this

point he showed that he had been listening intently. He wheeled round with angering insolence, his eyes widely opened, his head thrown back.

"Oh," said Monty, as if with surprise. "You've come to chaffer!"

ii

Blanche flinched, and Patricia—stung to loyalty for one so helpless in face of the power to insult—felt a sudden outgoing of pity for her.

"You poor thing!" she cried vehemently. "You're suffering!"

"Oh, don't be sentimental!" cried Blanche, in a harsh, impatient voice. She jerked her head in pain. "I haven't come to chaffer, and I've got no use for your school-girl sympathy. Keep that for your own wounds. I'm dealing with real things, as Monty will discover in a minute. You, with your silly baby face, haven't the heart to understand. You . . . But I'm forgetting. Monty won't like me to speak harshly to his promised bride. He'll——"

"I'm not!" shouted Patricia, suddenly out of control. "I *wouldn't!*" She was sparkling with temper; and yet remained staring at Blanche. Her feelings were in tumult—indignation in conflict with fear, and both with pity. "Nothing can keep me from being sorry for you," she said, "because you're unhappy. I don't like you. I don't *like* you. But I'm sorry for you."

"Well, that's very nice," drawled Blanche. "It's so nice for women to feel for one another."

"If you've not come for Patricia's pity, and not come to raise the thousand pounds, which, after all, is quite a generous sum——" began Monty.

"During all the time we've known each other, I've taken no money from you, Monty. D'you realise that?"

You couldn't realise it! It's not in your nature to realise it, because you're avaricious yourself, and find avariciousness . . . Oh, God . . ." Blanche's voice dropped wearily. "Haven't I heard your views of money . . . Don't I know you, Monty? How *well* I know you. Too well! No, I haven't come for money. I don't want it. I wouldn't take money——"

"But, my dear, you *must*," Monty said. He turned quickly, and came towards her, ignoring Patricia, whom he had forgotten. "It's the only thing I can give you. Look, I'll make it two thousand. I want to be generous——"

"Generous! My God!" whispered Patricia. She raised her hands in an unconscious gesture. Was it really thus that Monty—that such men—computed generosity? In guineas? She was distraught.

"But it's no good to think that you and I can go on," Monty was continuing. "We can't go on." Even here he was speaking slowly and deliberately, in that thick, sweet voice which was so seldom raised beyond quietness. "Our interest is gone. The whole thing's finished, you know."

Blanche looked at him, her face drawn, and her lips parted in a miserable smile.

"Finished, yes," she said. "You're tired of me. That I realise. I realised it long ago. *Tant pis*. But it isn't finished." She shook her head. "Five years ago I was tired of Fred. I met *you*. Now you're tired. But you've forgotten Fred."

"Fred!" exclaimed Monty. "What's he got to do with it?" His voice was suddenly coarse with cruelty. "He doesn't count. It's nothing to do with him."

"That's why I came," said Blanche, very low. "All this time Fred's been wondering why I didn't care for him . . ."

"Look here, Blanche," said Monty, quietly. "It's no good to threaten me. You know that!"

"I'm not threatening you, my dear," returned Blanche, with a shudder. "But it seems that Fred's found a little girl he wants to marry."

"Fred!" cried Monty. He seemed astounded. Behind his air of surprise his thoughts moved with the speed of lightning. "What d'you mean?"

"Just that. You see, he's had me watched," answered Blanche. "He says he's got all he needs. So I've brought you back your money. He's vengeful, Monty. He'll go for damages."

iii

Patricia conceived the situation. Blanche, consumed with that hot, wasting love which is concentrated upon the fear of loss, watched, trapped by a husband as unscrupulous as herself; Monty, at first passionate, as he had been with Patricia herself, and with more success, with his love tiring, bent upon extrication, also watched, trapped; herself, a spectator, half-guilty as the result of foolish recklessness, trapped here, but possessing the power of flight. She could escape, and would eventually do so; but there was no escape for Blanche. There was none, perhaps, for Monty. Ugly love, ugly renunciation, and a squalid sequel; and what then! No hope for Blanche! Nothing for that poor, haggard woman with the ugly elbows and the glittering wretched eyes of a dumb creature in pain. There was even no future for her. Patricia was appalled. And Monty's clumsy attempt—so grossly insensitive—to close the intrigue with money. . . . Why had he chosen this way? A quarrel there had been, a parting, some coarse-grained assumption and deliberate plan to make the parting "equitable"

and final. He must have had some urgent reason. Herself? Monty gave a jeering laugh.

"Well, done, Fred," he said quietly. And then, after a pause: "And where's his evidence? He's bluffing, Blanche."

"You say that . . ." Blanche contemptuously answered. "He's not bluffing, Monty. He's got an object. I *know*. And it isn't money. It's the little girl."

"But, good God, what's that to do with me?" demanded Monty. "Or, for that matter, with you? Nothing. Nothing whatever. Any little girl, at Fred's age, isn't going to be particularly squeamish about marriage. You've only to look at Fred, too. She must be out for what she can get. Oh, no, it's absurd. Take it from me, Blanche, he's bluffing!"

While Patricia, more impressed than ever, was filled with consternation at this inside glimpse of the working of Monty's mind, Blanche sighed. Perhaps it was no revelation to her? Were, then, *all* people at bottom coarse, cynical? Was she herself? Patricia recoiled from a question. Again she had the sense of comparing those anxious, ghastly eyes to the eyes of a monkey, which seem to hold all misery, and anxiously to survey a treacherous and sophisticated and bewildering world. So might her own eyes have looked if they had indeed, at this moment, mirrored her dread.

"You'll see," at last Blanche answered quietly, after a moment's pause.

Monty shrugged his shoulders. He was not so obstinate in his belief as his speech made him appear. Already he was searching in his memory for occasions, for details, for possible spies. An idea occurred to him.

"Jacobs?" he asked. "Impossible."

Blanche shook her head. Patricia, watching her,

thought she was paler. The brilliant lips were hardly parted as she spoke.

"Nothing's impossible," answered Blanche, drawing her breath quickly.

Monty looked at her with sudden attention. Suspicion darted to his eyes.

"You?" he cried. "Not you, Blanche?" His face had crimsoned. Again Blanche slowly shook her head.

"Nothing's impossible," she repeated.

iv

It was then only that she took further notice of Patricia, to whom she made a slight ironic inclination of the head. While Monty stood with that brooding glance of suspicion still directed upon her, his doubt, once awakened not easily to be dispelled, Blanche opened the door.

"You want to go, don't you?" she said. "Well, you can go now. We shall get along better without you now. I hope you've been edified. You've seen Monty, and you've seen me, and you've learnt quite a lot that you won't be able to repeat. It'll do you good. You once said that the world was full of women who had found out too late. I wish that you could be one of them. I should enjoy it. Now go."

Patricia, in silence, passed from the room, and into the hall; and the door was closed again. Monty had not spoken. She was alone in the hall, which rose lofty and spacious above her head to a painted ceiling, the whole in a brilliant blue. Around the ceiling ran a strip of shaded light, the reflection of which made the hall's illumination. The walls were hung with thick brilliant curtains which deadened all sound, and thick rugs lay along the polished parquet flooring. Only by the door stood a single small piece of statuary, a reproduction of

a classic fragment. There seemed to be a stifling heaviness in the air, as of scent, so much had she been affected by the late scenes. Patricia paused here as one in a dream, bowed and trembling, but with emotion that was new to her. She was no longer afraid or angry; but she was pierced through and through with the longing for contact with something unquestionably clean.

She had reached the heavy front door. Her hand was outstretched to the catch. And then she hesitated. This poignant desire was irresistible. It was the longing to be assuaged. Only by such contact could she recover purity, could she be at peace. Memory flashed a thought into Patricia's mind. With a glance across her shoulder, a hasty step to the wide staircase, a pause for intent listening, she ran back into the room from which she had a short time before taken her hat and coat.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: NIGHT CALL

i

AT his desk that day, Edgar had worked loyally to keep his attention concentrated upon matters in hand. He had always been in the habit of excluding private concerns from his mind during business hours; and even here, owing to determination and practice, he was partly successful. He did not consciously think of Patricia while he was reading and dictating letters, while he was talking to several exacting visitors, while he telephoned, and even while he lunched in company with other business men. He made no attempt to be alone or to be in company. It was not apparent to any of those who dealt with him that day that he was otherwise than as usual—competent, friendly, and benevolently unshakable in decision. And yet the secret Edgar, the unsuspected Edgar, the Edgar who was Hamlet, was extremely disturbed. This Edgar was faced with a crisis. He was angry. He was angry and exasperated and broken-hearted. But he was much more angry and exasperated than he was broken-hearted. And in the middle of his emotions, this secret Edgar was engaged in the preposterous act of laughing.

The secret Edgar was, in fact, a little boy who had never grown up; but he concealed this from everybody, and it was supposed that he did not exist. Therefore the really grown-up persons in Edgar's office—such as his typist and his junior clerks and his shipping clerks—had a feeling of superiority to him which was mingled with their feeling of respect. They all thought, privately,

how imaginative they were, in being able to enjoy books and plays which contained whimsical notions, and how completely a business man Edgar was. And this secret Edgar, who lost his temper and raged and roared with merriment in the middle of his own furies, was like a little boy who had been angry and cannot keep on being angry because everybody else, so amused, is trying to remain grave. The secret Edgar was unsuspected by those around the outward Edgar; and Edgar lived so entirely in the secret Edgar that he never knew that there was any other Edgar at all. It never entered his head to suppose that there were two Edgars—outside and inside, as it were,—and as the serious Edgar had a day's work to do, the secret Edgar made no attempt to interfere. The day's work was done; the last letter was signed; and Edgar—the composite Edgar—the physical Edgar—was at length free to abandon himself to anger and exasperation and broken heart and laughter. He put his hat unemotionally upon his head, and carefully threaded himself into his overcoat; and then he left the office, and was out in the darkness and traffic of the City of London.

Night in the City of London, on a week-day, is as remarkable and as romantically bizarre as night in some such centre of the engineering industry as Barrow-in-Furness, where the tipping of molten slag and the blazing sky-reflections of many furnaces compose miraculous effects for the sensitive. As Edgar stepped out into the cold air, thousands of people were making the sidewalks impassable, and pressing out into the asphalted roadways, and jostling and going self-absorbed to every point of the compass. Many vehicles were joined in the general hustle and congestion; cabs, omnibuses, postal-vans, and the like, all flashed their way through the crowds. Deafening noises filled the ears. Lights and shadows fought desperately their incessant battle. Boys and

young men carrying waste-paper baskets full of letters, or piles of parcels which extended from their waists to their chins, or bundles carried fore and aft across their bent shoulders, staggered from all directions; others ran, doubling in and out among the foot-passengers and the vehicles, unburdened, hurrying hither and thither, their little black hats pressed down upon their ears, or their little cheap soft felt hats cocked askew with impudent carelessness. Others again wore no hats at all, but swung along bare-headed and short-coated even in the chilly evening breeze. High above the streets were globes of white light, which hung centrally, without standards to support them. And in these narrow streets, in the white, fizzing lights, amid the close-running traffic, with this noise and helter-skelter rushing to catch posts and trains and omnibuses dinning into his ears and dazzling his eyes and bewildering his senses, the secret Edgar found himself sensibly exhilarated. It was quite dark, and the sky was invisible. Somewhere beyond the crowd and the lights, and beyond the overhanging murk, it lay; to be guessed and known, but never to be seen. He had worked well all day. He was contented with the way in which various transactions in which he was engaged were progressing. And only one thing in all the world caused him distress; and yet that one thing, so all-important, out-weighed every complacency and every other care. It was a preoccupation. It was Patricia.

Because of Patricia, Edgar was angry and exasperated and broken-hearted. Because of Patricia, he was shaken with preposterous laughter.

ii

Within an hour he was indoors, in that house in Kensington where Patricia had realised what the word

"home" might mean. The house was still; the servants were quiet-footed and the carpets were thick. Doors, well-made and heavy, closed gently and remained closed, without rattling. Even Pulcinella was subdued by even-tide, except upon the arrival of a member of the family much beloved. Then no amount of custom could stale the little dog's rapture. Edgar admitted himself, and washed, and went down to the brown room upon the mezzanine floor which was his own room, where there was a fire; and where books upon white-enamelled shelves warmed the walls from floor to ceiling and made them cordially glow with companionship. He had an hour before dinner, an hour in which to vent his anger and exasperation, in which to contemplate his broken heart.¹ And when he reached the room he spent his hour in doing none of these things. He sat instead and tried to decide what he was going to do about Patricia. For he had now definitely made up his mind that Patricia was to be won. No young woman is so ostentatiously decided when she has in fact made up her mind.

At the same time, Patricia was a mystery to Edgar. He could have named her traits with scarcely a grievous error in observation; but, this done, she would still have been a mystery. A man who behaved as she was obviously in the habit of behaving could have had no interest for Edgar. If he had not loved Patricia he would have found her insufferable. But he loved her. The secret Edgar—who was all heart—loved her; the outward Edgar merely received impressions of her. The impressions might constantly be disagreeable—some of them were wholly disagreeable;—but they slipped into the heart of the secret Edgar, which was big enough to hold them all. And it was this secret Edgar who conned the mystery, with rather more humour than the outward Edgar was always supposed to possess. Which explains

why Edgar's ruminations were interrupted by laughter—not loud, hearty, hopelessly solemn laughter; but laughter that was a catching of the breath, explosive, and then silent.

"She is the most preposterous creature that ever lived," said Edgar. "The most conceited, blind, ridiculous little fathead. . . ."

He would not have dared to communicate this view of Patricia to anybody alive. He would not have dared to mention it even to Claudia. Even to hint the smallest part of it to Patricia herself would have been the act of a madman. And yet to himself Edgar was frank and fair about it. Because Edgar knew that when he said or thought such a thing every word was qualified and softened by an emotion in himself towards the object of his laughter which was without comparison the most precious thing in his life.

iii

Presently he heard the telephone bell ringing downstairs, and as he was not sure that Claudia was in, and as Mrs. Mayne was almost as ridiculous on the telephone as her husband, who invariably rang off while he went to find somebody less incompetent, Edgar walked out of the room. The bell had ceased ringing; but he proceeded as far as the clothes-cupboard where it was installed, on the chance that the answerer might not be Claudia. It was she, however. As Edgar put his head inside the clothes-cupboard she was saying "Hold on," and she turned as if to leave the cupboard in search of somebody who was wanted.

"Oh, there you are," said Claudia. "I didn't know you were in. It's Mr. Gaythorpe."

Edgar took the receiver from his sister's hand. Old Gaythorpe was one of those rare people who speak as

clearly on the telephone as they would speak in a room. Every word he said was audible. Edgar could imagine the old man present. The dry wisdom of his manner was in an extraordinary degree conveyed by the sound of his voice.

"Look here, young man," said Gaythorpe. "I've been kept here by importunate suitors. My train has gone. I want to see you. Can I come to dinner?"

"Of course!" cried Edgar, foolhardy in giving such encouragement without consultation with the kitchen, but relying upon Mayne ingenuity to expand a meal at short notice.

"I'll take what Mrs. Mayne gives me," the voice continued, the voice of an experienced family man. "Right. I'll come along."

Edgar flung up the receiver. He turned to Claudia, who was leaning pensively against the doorpost, waiting to hear the worst.

"He's coming to dinner."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Claudia, blanching. "I must see mother! We've got one guest already—Olivia Stephens."

"Oh, do you know her?" said Edgar, surprised. He was familiar with the name; but he could not at first discover in what connection.

"School with her," called Claudia, hurrying away. "Known her all my life. So have you. Come and talk to her."

It was evidently to be a bright evening. Edgar followed, trying to remember Olivia Stephens, and to recall what he knew of her. There came back to his mind a picture of a girl who came to see Claudia in bygone days, a girl with a long plait of hair and very arched brows and a freckled snub nose; of an older girl with her hair up, who had not very much to say for herself; of a

young creature who flaunted a shapeless olive-green frock down the cobbled street of a Cornish fishing village, attended by an amiable fellow in a reddish-brown Norfolk suit, bearing a black-bowled pipe and a cudgel. This picture, which wavered and sharpened in its successive stages, like a series of kinema close-ups, recalled Olivia to his experience. She was the girl who had married an artist—the Norfolk-jacketed young man with the pipe; upon whose behalf Edgar had been persuaded to buy some water-colour drawings which hung in his mother's bedroom. What was it about her?—poor, artist-husband—cheerful—ah, babies! Olivia was the girl who had the two babies! The girl of his ideal! She it was of whom Claudia had given accounts which had filled him with admiring approval. Edgar was triumphant at his own instinct for clues and associations. It came into his head that he had seen vague resemblances to Olivia and the young artist at Monty's September party. Of course! He had not spoken to her, because his memory had been too vague; but now he was clear. The girl he had seen must indeed have been Olivia; and her artistic husband must have been the link with Monty and the æsthetes. They were the young people who were still in love with each other. He could recall their happiness. Even in recollection Edgar was pleased with them.

"Babies," he ejaculated recognisingly to himself. He entered the sitting-room with the anticipation of interest; but with a certain sinking of the heart lest Olivia should be restricted to a single topic.

iv

"How are you, Edgar?" asked Olivia. She sat by the fire in the blue-grey drawing-room; and there was work

in her hands. The work was obviously a garment for a small child. He recognised her at once by the well-arched eyebrows, and by the fact that she wore—as in his first vision—a dress which was olive-green in colour. The freckles were banished (whether by the season, or by some more permanent cure, he could not tell); but the calm, innocent eyes and odd little nose were much as he remembered them to have been. Her shoulders were broader, and her breast had developed. Otherwise she was the agreeable creature he had known, between fair and dark, with plump arms and legs and a lot of fair hair. She had a very sweet lazy smile, and an unself-conscious manner which came of not taking herself very seriously. She was about twenty-six. Theoretically, Edgar knew, Olivia was his ideal type of woman. She gave love with the eager readiness of the trustful child; she spoke quietly and seldom, but without constraints; she had courage and patience and unselfishness. And he was in love with her opposite. One more insoluble problem.

"How are you?" he answered. "And how's . . . er, Stephens?" Then, with the proud feeling of taking his fences: "And how are the babies?"

"How nice of you to ask about them!" said Olivia, comfortably, with her slow, happy, lazy smile. "Joan isn't very grand. She's got a cold. That makes her just a little trying and sentimental at the moment. But Michael is tremendously hefty, and already weighs about ten stone. He's a sort of prize ox. In fact Mercy—Peter's sister—says he's not like a baby at all, but like a beautiful white calf. You haven't seen either of them, I expect, though Claudia has. Joan's three; and Michael's just over a year, and walks well. Look here, you ought to come and see them. They'd do you good. You must be getting quite middle-aged, Edgar. Yes, I

can *see* you are. You ought to have children of your own. Then you wouldn't have time to grow old. Come and see them, will you?"

"This conversation is going to be extremely indelicate and extremely rude, I can see," replied Edgar. "I begin already to remember you as an excessively rude and indelicate girl in a pigtail. I am *not* middle-aged, and I don't *look* as though I were middle-aged. So that's finished. As to the babies, I *will* come. I ought to have come before; but I had forgotten all about you. When Claudia said you were here I had really to recall who you were. How is it you never come to see us? Or *do* you come, secretly?"

Olivia grimaced.

"I go out very little. The babies, you see. Michael needs somebody still—they both need somebody to put them to bed; and Michael sometimes yells for me. I'm only out this evening because Peter's sister is staying with us. Peter's coming for me later on. He couldn't come to dinner, because he's finishing some work."

"Painting?"

Olivia shook her head, a little ruefully.

"Black-and-white. He's got some regular work to do at last. So things are looking up with us. We're beginning to save. He wants us to go and live in the country somewhere—not too far away—for the sake of the babies; and we shall do that next year if we can get a cottage."

"But would you like that? Wouldn't it be dull for you?" asked Edgar.

Olivia shook her head again, this time without any ruefulness at all.

"Nothing could be duller than London," she said. "Besides, if we had a nurse, Peter and I could always come up to town for an evening. One consequence of

being rich would be a nurse; and that would mean lots of liberty, with the right girl. We shouldn't go anywhere quite in the wilds. And it isn't as though Joan would need a school just yet. She's got another three years before she need go. The great thing is for them to be able to play out-of-doors."

Edgar nodded, much impressed by this notion of life.

"Would *you* be happier?" he asked.

"I?" cried Olivia. "I couldn't be. I seem to have got everything I want."

Edgar stared meditatively at this remarkable woman.

"You're very fortunate," he said, drily. And then: "You're very rare."

V

With dinner came the other guest, cynically benevolent as ever; and the table in the big old-fashioned dining-room was a full one. At it there were three elderly people and three young ones; and, as if naturally, all the talking which was not done by Mrs. Mayne took place between Claudia and old Gaythorpe. They sparred on the best of terms, because there was a very pleasant feeling between them, and they were like partners in a game who knew each other's play. Mr. Mayne sat with fierce dignity at one end of the table, high above the heat of battle; and his wife, placidly nimble of brain, at the other, absorbed in it. Olivia blissfully enjoyed her dinner in a home-made frock, with hands that were reddened by house-work, and an inner happiness which caused her to accept every kindness with glee. Edgar, lazily listening to Claudia in combat with his old friend, was content to leave the conversation to them. And Claudia, who was full of spirits, was being agile and aggressive; and old Gaythorpe was in his own dry way being equally agile and aggressive. The motto of each

was the same: "Never give your adversary a moment's peace."

"You seem to think that income tax is the only tax there is!" cried Claudia. "It's the rich man's tax, and always will be. If you were poor, and paid your taxation indirectly—"

"I do that as well, my dear Claudia. My sugar costs me—"

"Neither your sugar nor your coal!" she retorted.

"Indeed, yes."

"Our sugar doesn't. Nor our tea. Nor our coal. We buy in bulk. If you don't escape, it's by bad buying. We have tons of coal. Poor people buy in quarter-hundredweights, and pay fifty per cent more. A ha'porth of jam—you can't get ha'porths now, as it happens—multiplied many times makes much more a pot than you pay. Every necessary costs more."

"Is jam a necessary? I never eat it."

"Your pampered children do."

"Ah, my children. Yes. . . . Pampered *indeed*. I agree. The younger generation, of course. Take the cost of education, Claudia. What have I paid in school fees?"

"If the Council schools are all you say, they'd have been quite adequate."

"Your own dexterity isn't the fruit of the Council school," parried Gaythorpe.

"No; it's my own!" cried Claudia.

"Claudia, dear," objected Mrs. Mayne. "Your father and I can hardly be called ordinary people."

They all laughed at this simple interruption. Claudia was instantly deflated. She turned to Olivia.

"Are you going to give your babies any education?" she demanded.

"Well," said Olivia. "Peter doesn't think ordinary

education is much good. He thinks it just spoils children to be taught by rote. But then he thinks that better education only teaches them to spend money—not to make it. He was at a public school himself.”

“And is he well-educated?” pressed Claudia.

“Oh, he . . . of course, he *knows* a lot. But it isn’t very precise knowledge. He can’t spell: he’s never sure about words like ‘separate’ or ‘receipt.’ He’s not very good at figures. I have to do the sums as a rule; but then of course that’s just knack.”

“Yes, and there’s another thing!” Claudia, reminded by Olivia’s admission as to figures, returned to her direct challenge. “Women!”

There was a general groan.

“He’s very unsound there,” interjected Edgar, cheerfully. “You’d better go no further.”

“By the way, Olivia.” Claudia was diverted from her argument. “Have you ever met an awful girl—an artist—called Amy Roberts?”

“O-oh!” exclaimed Olivia, in disgust. “Where on earth did you meet her?”

“At Patricia’s—Patricia Quin’s.”

“Such a nice girl,” said Mrs. Mayne, aside to Gaythorpe. “A friend of Edgar’s.”

Instantly Gaythorpe shot a glance of inexpressible malice at Edgar.

“Indeed,” he said, politely. There was benign poison in his encouraging tone. He beamed upon Mrs. Mayne, hoping for further information about Edgar’s friend, immediately recalling the Miss Fly-away of their conversation.

“Patricia Quin?” repeated Olivia, doubtfully. “Oh, a fair girl—. Isn’t she Harry Greenlees’s mistress?”

“No.” Edgar did not hear himself speak.

"Who told you that?" indignantly cried Claudia. "It's scandalous!"

Olivia, disconcerted, tried to remember the name of her informant. The general distress was so obvious that she slightly reddened.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I'm sorry if I've said something I ought not to. I thought there wasn't any question about it. I think it was Blanche Tallentyre who told Peter."

"Well, it's not true!" cried Claudia. "What a beast Blanche Tallentyre must be. Have you ever met her, Edgar?"

Edgar, deeply moved, was staring at the table, his face stern. All their eyes were upon him. He had a remembered glimpse of an unhappy-looking woman across a dinner-table, of lips parted to speak, of a speech checked and an enmity formed in a single instant.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "At Monty's. Patricia was rude to her. That's the explanation. Not deliberately rude, but wounding. I saw that she felt vicious about it. But surely you don't accept anything *she* might say as probable, Olivia?"

"Perhaps not," Olivia agreed. "No: she isn't a nice woman. I suppose there's no doubt that she's Monty's mistress, herself."

"Dear, dear!" protested Mrs. Mayne. "It seems so horrible to have that word bandied about by nice young girls. It's such a pity. Don't you think so, Mr. Gaythorpe?"

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Mayne," said the old man. "A great pity. A very great pity. And who—" he paused, speaking across the table to Edgar. "Who is Monty?"

"Monty Rosenberg." It was a chorus.

"Indeed. And is he a friend of yours, Edgar?"

Edgar's eyes met those of his tormentor very candidly across the table.

"Perhaps one could hardly call him a friend," he suavely replied.

"Ah," said Gaythorpe. "Perhaps a debtor?"

No reply was returned to his question, which had been hardly audible. Gaythorpe bit his lower lip. The rims of his glasses caught the light as he glanced aside. He was not, perhaps, altogether certain; but he thought he had made a very fair guess at the answers to two questions which for some time had been troubling him. He wondered whether Monty had ever asked for Edgar's help, and whether Patricia had ever refused it. . . .

vi

Although Edgar had so immediately denied the assertion that Patricia was Harry's mistress, Olivia's words caused him suffering so poignant that he could hardly maintain composure under the scrutiny of the party. He had to admit his own jealousy of Harry, and he was also made to remember Patricia's claim to wickedness, and Claudia's terrible questions at the breakfast-table. Together they made a hateful collection of poisonous thoughts. Although he now answered when he was addressed, he did so with his mind far away. He could not eat; he could not think. His one impulse was to get away from this table, from these people, in order that he might be alone. All the anger and all the laughter which had shaken him earlier in the evening were banished. He did not believe the suggestions which his mind stealthily insinuated; but they were all the time sliding into his attention, as though devils were at work in his tired brain, maddening him. If Patricia were not pure, of what use her youth, her charm, her cleverness?

None, none, none! He was distraught with suspicions; not with beliefs, not with doubts; but with these suggestions, which were like secret voices of temptation. It was essential that he should deal with them seriously, by direct conflict, and not emotionally, by infatuated refusal to face possibilities.

And the meal continued, and the chatter—although sobered by the turn which the talk had taken—was maintained. Edgar could not leave the others. Gaythorpe was his guest. He must play his part. This he did, with honest endeavour to preserve his good spirits and his composure. He followed the others into the drawing-room, and there drank coffee with them. For a moment it struck him that it was almost better to be with the whole party than with Gaythorpe alone. If Gaythorpe were in his study, then a process of inquiry might be applied; until Edgar could not be sure of his power to avoid such irritability as would be, to Gaythorpe's probing mind, more betraying than actual proclamation.

But either from tact or from imperceptiveness, Gaythorpe made no attempt, when at last they withdrew from the others, to introduce a personal note. His desire to see Edgar that night had been due entirely to business problems; and it was with these that the two men were engaged for a further hour. Only as he left, old Gaythorpe, in bidding farewell to Mrs. Mayne, dropped a hint unheard by Edgar. To Mrs. Mayne's invitation for another evening he made a significant reply.

"And I hope that the next time I come I shall have the pleasure of meeting Miss Patricia . . . Patricia Quin. You have quite whetted my appetite to see the young lady."

He bowed, and his hand-pressure was a reassurance to Mrs. Mayne; who was much comforted by such confirmation of her belief in Patricia's innocence.

At last Edgar was alone. He had bidden good-bye to Olivia, and had received her invitation to come at any time, on any day, to visit the babies. He had said good-night to his mother and father, had received a light touch of farewell from his sister; and he was in his room, by the fire, with a pipe; and a tray bearing a decanter, a syphon, and a glass, together with a slice of Mrs. Mayne's latest private cake, lay on a small table behind him. He was bending over the fire in the room's light glow, and the books were shining and the shelves gleaming in the shadow, when, with a slight rustle, Claudia appeared in a long silk dressing-gown, her hair plaited for the night.

"My dear," she hurriedly said. "I knew you'd feel a bit sick. You don't believe it's true, do you?" The remark was not a question. It was a statement.

Edgar turned, making no pretence of misunderstanding her.

"No," he said. "It's not true. And of course it's the venom of a miserable woman. But it doesn't make me very cheerful, because . . . well, at any rate, they're friends."

"I was afraid of that," breathed Claudia. "I thought she might be . . . in love with him. I got an idea . . . nothing at all . . . just the sort of thing you imagine. . . . That's really why I came."

"Well, we'll see," answered Edgar, gravely, and without very much sanguine colour in his tone. "Good-night."

No caress passed. Claudia was a sister, and Edgar was a brother. They loved and trusted each other. But neither could have borne to see the other in acute distress; because both knew that the cause of such distress

would necessarily be external to themselves, and therefore beyond reach of consolation. Claudia silently withdrew.

Nevertheless, her visit had done Edgar good. He sat on, smoking; and the fire grew less brilliant, dying on the surface and keeping its red heart, as it would continue to do long after the grate had seemed to a casual eye to be filled only with sullen ash. The room was a large one, and there were many books in bright, warm bindings. A desk stood near the window, in such a position that in daylight it would catch the sun upon its left side. The desk was orderly. It bore a stand lamp and a stationery cabinet, and various bundles of papers, tied or encircled with bands. To this desk Edgar presently went, standing above it lost in thought, the finger tips of one hand resting lightly upon its surface. And at length, when his pipe was burning harshly, he knocked out the remaining charred fragments of tobacco, and mixed himself a whisky-and-soda. In a few minutes he would be in bed, thinking still of Patricia. . . .

And, as he thought that, it seemed to Edgar that he heard the ringing of the telephone bell. Strange! He opened the door of his room. There was no mistake. The bell was furiously ringing. It was echoing through the house. Edgar knew that everybody else was in bed, so he did not delay. He ran down to the clothes-cupboard, and heard the rattling of the bell still in the receiver as he put it to his ear.

"Hullo! Hullo!" he cried.

And from far off came a little breathless voice.

"Mr. Mayne's? Is that you? Edgar? This is Patricia. I'm at Monty's . . . yes, Monty's. Look here, I haven't . . . changed my mind. No. But I'm in trouble. Could you come and fetch me in your car? Could you? How splendid! Don't come to the house.

No, *don't* come. I'll walk along to Marlborough Road station, and wait for you there. Yes. You're sure it's all right? Sure? Be quick. Quick. . . ." Her voice died as she said the last words; showing that she was moving away from the telephone even as she spoke.

Strangely elated, his heart beating fast, Edgar stood for an instant ejaculating with surprise.

"Well!" he whispered to himself. "What on earth does *that* mean?" In his excitement Edgar gave a little laugh. "Extraordinary!"

No more time was wasted. It was precious. He ran quickly to the hall, back to get an overcoat, felt in its place for the garage key, remembered approximately the amount of petrol in the tank of his car, made sure that he had the key of the front door,—all as if in a single movement of thought and action; and then, with his coat still open, left the house at high speed. He was out again in the night, and in that chilly darkness, racing to the garage; and as he raced he laughed again, exhilarated by the sense of adventure, by the surprise of such a call, by quick speculation as to its cause. Above everything else, exhilarated by the knowledge that he was after all to see Patricia that night.

CHAPTER TWENTY: BABIES

i

THE night was very still and very fresh; but it was not freezing. A little wind hung and played in the trees, and sometimes swept along the ground; and it was dark because neither moon nor stars were visible. All the noises of the day were silenced. Only at times did a solitary taxi-cab create a burst of humming as it passed the end of a road, and the sound faded as suddenly as it had risen. Edgar, running from the house in his thin shoes, made hardly more than a light pattering upon the sidewalk. It was a night for adventure.

He could not yield to the quick speculations which darted to his brain; for the moment was one which demanded a clear head and rapidly applied thought. So many things might impede his progress: the car might be difficult to start, a tyre might be down, the thousand unexpected vagaries with which the motorist may at any moment be hindered were all present as possibilities to Edgar's mind. He was alert and anxious, bent upon meeting every emergency before it arose; and as he ran swiftly he was almost praying that there might on this occasion be no mishap.

The garage in which Edgar kept his car lay at some distance from his home. It had been a stable; but was so no longer. Two heavy, painted doors fastened with a padlock. They were opened very quickly, and pushed back against the outer wall of the garage. The light showed his faithful friend standing mutely in its place, as if waiting for his arrival—a grave little dark blue

coupé with a long blue bonnet to match its body, and an interior of soft grey. Even in his haste, Edgar looked proudly upon the car. It was so beautiful, so speedy, so responsive to his touch; its line was so graceful, its lightness so apparent. Very fit instrument was this car for the deliverance of any maid in distress. There was no least incongruity between it and the romantic mission upon which Edgar believed himself to be engaged.

And yet he must not stay to think or feel. For him the detail of mechanical aids to swiftness was of urgent importance. As if in one movement, he switched on the lights, front and tail, manipulated three little knobs, ran quickly to the front of the car, and gave his engine a swing. His lips were tightly compressed; his expert ear was strained. . . . The engine was cold. What if there should be a difficulty in starting? Ghastly! Again he swung upon the handle, and at the resulting sound straightened with a breath of inexplicable relief. Within that little blur of fluttering noise lay reassurance. It was all right. Tick-a-tick-a-tick-a-tick, said the engine, as happy and regular as if the car were coasting a hill. One, two, three; Edgar was in his place. The noise was increased. The car was in motion. He was out upon the dark road, speeding to Patricia through the deserted streets, now so fair and open to the questing traveller; the only sound audible to Edgar that beautiful eagerness which animated his own car. His eyes were steady and his hand easy upon the wheel. The lights of the main thoroughfares were clear, unearthly, and the way was free, as if inviting him to the race.

London at night he knew; but this journey gave Edgar a new vision of it. So quickly did he pass familiar objects that they swam together in his recording impression. It was London dignified and purified into ghostly loveliness by the night, but London so decreased

in size that it became a village. All monuments and buildings of great size or antiquity were made insignificant; the broad roads of the west as he sped through them were so many paths. He had his goal, and could not attend the beauties he so silently and so eagerly left upon his way.

And at last, as he emerged to the appointed meeting-place, Edgar saw Patricia, a little disconsolate figure, waiting in the shadow of the railway-station façade. All there was darkness. The last trains had rumbled their way through the station, and it was as deserted as if it had been forgotten. Only Patricia's outline was to be discerned, but she was recognisable, and as he turned the car and ran alongside the kerb she came immediately forward. Both moved as in a dream. He had one glimpse of a white face within the radiance of the nearer lamp; and his nerves thrilled as he opened the door so that she could join him. It was an almost mute encounter, with midnight long past, in this silence and darkness, and there was unavoidable constraint upon both sides, so singular was the relation existing between them. Without a word, Patricia shut the door and drew back into the farther corner of the car, away from Edgar. To his inquiry she made no answer, and he saw that her eyes were closed, as if in complete exhaustion. Puzzled, Edgar touched her hand once; but there was no response, and after a single instant in which he tried to gain some knowledge from Patricia's expression he turned away once more and in silence they began their journey together.

ii

Now all was changed. Edgar no longer drove at reckless speed. He went slowly and easily by a longer route, which took them by frequented streets; and they passed

many cabs or cars travelling from the opposite direction. They were thus not alone, since they were in an active world. Edgar was still concentrated upon the car and the road; but he was very conscious of Patricia's ominous and stubborn silence. Many explanations of it, and speculations as to what had happened, and what had made her telephone to him at so late an hour entered his head; but a moving automobile at night, in a city, when one is the driver, is not a possible situation for agitated enquiry. Edgar therefore waited for Patricia to explain of her own accord, which apparently she could not yet do. Therefore, with only occasional slight glances aside at the face half invisible in the darkness, he concerned himself wholly with their progress. Only when the road was at last clear, and he could take the wheel with his right hand, did he stretch out the left to her.

"What is it?" he asked. "What *was* it?"

Patricia took his hand in both her own, and pressed it, holding it tightly against her breast. But still she did not speak; and in a moment, when there was an obstruction in the road, Edgar was forced to withdraw his hand so that he could use the other to sound the warning horn. He could feel Patricia's hand extended so that she could touch him, and the knowledge that she wished this reassuring contact gave him a faint happiness; and so they sat together in the darkness until they arrived in Chelsea, and in the road where Patricia lived. Edgar stopped the car and the engine, turning to her.

"You haven't changed your mind," he said, in a murmur. "What then?"

His arm was moved to embrace her; but she did not permit it. Only she again took his hand in both of hers.

"I haven't changed my mind at all," said Patricia in a cold voice.

"So I heard," answered Edgar, smiling, his face close to hers.

"But I wanted to see you," she whispered.

"And then?"

There was a pause.

"Nothing," whispered Patricia again, so low that he could hardly hear her. She immediately afterwards stiffened, discarding his hand as though it had been a loathsome temptation. Edgar stared down at his poor hand. "Nothing—nothing at all."

"It's done you good to see me?" he asked. He could see a quick little nodding. "Well, that's something, don't you think?"

"You're good," said Patricia. "You're better than me."

"Of course, I'm extraordinarily good," Edgar agreed. "But—"

"Silly!" It was a sort of ashamed mumble that he heard. "Well, I'm going now."

"Oh, not yet." He had tried to take her hand; but Patricia eluded him, and bent forward to open the door. The catch was difficult, and she could not master it. Edgar also bent forward, both arms extended; and it seemed so much easier to take Patricia in his arms than to undo the catch of the door that he could not help following the easier course.

"No!" cried Patricia, succeeding with the catch, and almost tumbling out of the car. She shut the door firmly behind her; and Edgar, inside, looked out upon Patricia, who stood without. The window upon that side of the car was raised, and so communication between them was impossible. Edgar opened the door. "Don't get out," said Patricia, quickly. "Thank you very much for coming for me. It was awfully good of you to come."

"Not at all," said Edgar, very politely, stepping to

the ground. "But won't you tell me why you wanted to see me? And there are one or two other things, by the way—"

Patricia groaned.

"I can't argue with you to-night," she said, as if in a goaded voice of exhaustion.

"Will you argue with me to-morrow?"

"I'll *never* argue with you!" vehemently exclaimed Patricia. He did not believe her. He thought she would always argue with him. "And I'm not sure that I want to see you to-morrow."

"Very well," said Edgar quietly. He took off his cap, and stepped back into the car.

"What time?" cried Patricia.

He leaned forward.

"You're a silly little thing!" he said. "But as to-morrow is Saturday, and I shall not go to the office at all, I'll call for you in this at ten o'clock, and take you to some thoroughly vulgar and third-rate hotel for lunch, and then I'll explain—I won't argue; but I'll explain—what's the matter with you."

And with that he used his mechanical starter, closed the door of the car, and would have driven off. But Patricia had come round to the open window of the car.

"Edgar," she said, pleadingly. "*Don't* be unkind. I've been a horrible little beast to-night; and I'm very ashamed of myself—and worse. And I had to see you to . . . to . . ." She stammered. "I can't tell you," she continued. "Yes, I can. I must. I wanted to see you to get clean again after what I've been going through this evening. And while I was waiting for you I thought I'd see if I was good enough for you. And I'm *not*. But do come for me to-morrow. It's very necessary. Really. Good-night, Edgar." She held her hand in at the window. He shook it, and Patricia, who per-

haps had expected another form of farewell, withdrew the hand as the car moved forward upon its homeward journey.

iii

The next morning Edgar gave Claudia the surprise of her life. They were sitting at breakfast, and Claudia was being very quiet and tactful in case Edgar should be feeling badly about what Olivia had said during dinner on the previous evening. She had taken peeps at him, and was gradually relaxing her vigilance in face of his apparently normal cheerfulness. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Mayne was present; and the brother and sister were eating and drinking with a sedate nonchalance customary to both.

"You going to the office to-day?" asked Claudia, suddenly.

Edgar awakened from some evidently pleasant pre-occupation.

"Er . . . no, not to-day," he said, helping himself to another piece of toast. "By the way, you've got a fur coat, haven't you? Could you lend it to me? That is, I suppose you wouldn't mind Patricia wearing it? I'm taking her out to-day in Budge, and she might be cold."

Claudia passed her hand across her forehead.

"Taking Patricia. . . . My poor boy!" she cried. "Trouble's turned your brain. No, no. *I'll* come if you think it would do you good; but Patricia . . ."

"I am taking Patricia out in Budge to-day," repeated Edgar. "And require the loan of your fur coat. Don't ask questions, there's a good girl; but if you wouldn't mind lending the coat it might be a boon."

Claudia collapsed.

"The world ends," she said, as if stupefied. "Of course, have my fur coat. Take anything. But for

Goodness' sake, Edgar, don't leave this thing unexplained. I couldn't bear it."

"I may bring Patricia here to dinner to-night," answered Edgar, briefly. "On the other hand, I may not."

"Quite probably not, I should say," observed Claudia, with detachment. "Does she *know* you're taking her out in Budge?" He nodded. Claudia rushed wildly to the door, and returned presently bearing a fur coat. "There!" she cried. "And if you won't tell me what communication you've had with Patricia since I went to bed last night you're a pig, and I'll throw you over."

He explained, tactfully, that Patricia had telephoned. He said no more. He was not now quite sure what *had* happened on the previous night. He could not disentangle from each other the speeches actually made and those which had occurred to him since as possible to have been made in such circumstances. He was sure of only one thing; and he was not, as yet, ready to tell Claudia the whole truth. Therefore he took her fur coat and swung easily out of the house bearing it upon his arm.

Claudia, left by herself at the breakfast-table, was bereft of self-confidence.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "What does it all mean? I'm flabbergasted!" She knew there had been no telephone call this morning. She knew that Patricia had no telephone in her rooms. It was a mystery. For the first time she wondered whether it might not be the case that Patricia loved Edgar. She had not believed that hitherto. It was a testimony to her insight as well as to her sisterly tact that she had not believed it and had not pretended to believe it, while at the same time she had resolved that it should become credible to both Edgar and herself. Perhaps, also, to Patricia. She went about her work during the morning with a lighter heart than she had known for several days.

Edgar was punctual in his arrival at Patricia's door. As he left the car and lowered its hood, a church clock near by struck the hour. He advanced to the front door, and knocked. And as he did so Patricia appeared at the door, dressed for going out. She had feverishly been ready for ten minutes, and had watched for him. She greeted him, but their eyes did not meet, and he could see that she was still pale, possibly from want of sleep; possibly even, it might have been, from inability to eat her breakfast.

"I brought a coat of Claudia's," he said, with a good deal of carelessness which covered a temporary lack of assurance. "You'd better wear it, because it may be very cold driving. Would you like to leave your own coat? No, better bring it."

Patricia was mystified as to his reasoning; but she allowed herself to be packed into the fur coat, and then sat quite still while Edgar re-started the car and drove down the road and round a corner into the King's Road and so through Putney to Kingston and out on to the Guildford road. She had tried to equal his casualness with her own; but she was feeling very shaky, and was glad of the silence. Patricia did not know where they were going; but the car's smooth motion was delightful, and the morning was crisply cold; and as they drew free of traffic and tramcars the opening country began to surround her with beauties which sprang freshly upon every hand and awakened self-forgetful rapture in her heart. Although the year was dying, there were trees which still clung to their leaves, and strange attractive byeways which caught the eye and roused the impulse to explore; and, as they sped farther, charming little towns and villages which she had never before seen. When

once they were through Guildford and upon the Hog's Back the views—thinned and obscured though they were by autumnal mists—were entrancing, and Patricia lay back with colour coming again into her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes. She was cosily warm in the borrowed fur coat; the car, although small, had the movement of one considerably larger; and as Patricia had almost complete ignorance of motoring the experience was new and fine. Everything passed swiftly—everything was glimpsed, half-seen, and immediately succeeded by some other object of beauty or interest, until it seemed as though she must be surfeited, since the greedy mind could not hold so many fleeting images of loveliness. Patricia thought that this must be the way in which children saw the whole of life—as a great swift progress of joys to which they had only to stretch their hands. But those who grew up knew that the joys passed before ever they were gathered. The joys alone? Perhaps the sorrows also. Everything . . . everything passed. . . . That was the thought in her mind. She remembered the French saying. . . . Everything passes. Would this journey end? Would she always travel unsatisfied, wonder-struck and unresting? Was that her lot? The fear of it made her shiver.

"Cold?" asked Edgar, aside.

Could he see her? Was he then watching, although so apparently intent upon the road? Patricia cried "No!" in response, and a further "Lovely!" in case he should be hurt; and then her eyes stole on a journey. If Edgar could know when she shivered, was there ever to be any escape from his watchfulness, his care? When Patricia, like the Devil, was sick, or afraid, there was nothing she so demanded as care; but when she was well, it irked her. She could see Edgar's face in profile, brown and kind and firm; and she was a little afraid of him. She

thought he could be stern. Not cruel—never cruel; but stern. And the words “all the better to eat you with, my dear” crept into Patricia’s head. She was very subdued, and although she was still observant of the beauties they passed, and stirred by the rapid motion through crisp air that was now tempered by brilliant sunshine, extraordinarily defensive argumentation was going on in her brain. If she were to marry Edgar, it must be after clear speech between them. Never for comfort or in despair. She was resolved upon that. For one thing, her respect for him exacted as much. Patricia’s nerve had been shaken, and she had lost some of her self-confidence; and, with that, some of her natural ease of carriage and pleasure in life itself.

“Where are we going?” she presently called out.


To her surprise, Edgar slowed down. He even stopped, there upon the Hog’s Back, with the beautiful country stretching away in two valleys upon each side of the lofty road.

“Wherever you like,” he said. “We can lunch at Winchester. There’s a village on the way there—a most charming village called Chawton, where Jane Austen lived—full of old thatched houses. You’d like it. I don’t know anything more delicious in its way. I don’t know if we could get food there.”

“Are you hungry?” she asked. Unconsciously her tone was arch; but with pathetic, troubled archness. “And what’s that about Jane Austen?”

“Well, I didn’t bring anything to eat, and the air will make you hungry. We can either go south from Farnham—only I don’t know the roads round Liss or Petersfield;—or we can go on to Winchester, lunch there, and go back by way of Basingstoke. Or we can turn back now and go through Guildford to Godalming. . . .”

“Oh, oh!” cried Patricia. “I don’t mind what we do.”



"You like it?" He was looking at her in such a peculiar way that Patricia shivered again. It seemed to break her composure, which she was struggling so hard to preserve.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered suddenly. "I'm not *worth* it!"

Her hands were in his, and her eyes were as candid as his own. So they sat in the car on that bright morning, upon the top of the Hog's Back, and the wide rise and fall of the lower lands spreading to north and south under a slight haze. The sky above them was a deep blue. The road was open, and it seemed that none used it, so peaceful was the scene upon this glorious morning. Only Edgar and Patricia were there, with the breeze around them, and the sunshine ardent, and a sense of the limitlessness of the world strong in both.

It was here that their talk began.

v

"Of course the trouble about you is that you don't love me," said Edgar, in a cool voice which showed that he was anxious by its elaborate calm. "Not, at any rate, as I love you."

"No," agreed Patricia. Her own tone was a copy of his; and the word was a mere acceptance. She was as grave as he, and yet neither was grave. They were both grave and not grave. But Patricia had said "no"; and Edgar had received the shock to which he had steeled himself.

"Do you—forgive me—you don't love anybody else? It isn't, of course, necessary that you should; but sometimes it's a factor."

Patricia glanced up at him, and even in her gravity she smiled.

"No, I don't love anybody else," she said. "And I know you well enough to know that when you talk like that you're being funny."

"I'm not being at all funny," protested Edgar. There was a sound of consent from Patricia. He went on, undeterred. "The reason you don't love anybody else is that you're in love with yourself."

"Oh." Patricia had not been so forewarned as to steel herself; and this shock depressed her. In a very low voice she said, trying to hide her wound: "I'm not much in love with myself at this moment."

The tone was so sad that unconsciously Edgar pressed her hands in pain. He would have done so much to save her from humiliation; and yet his way was clear and his attitude deliberately adopted.

"This is your wickedness, I suppose?" he asked patiently. Patricia nodded.

"At least, not wickedness—silliness. But perhaps you'd think it worse. I'd better tell you. Five minutes ago—a few days ago—I thought I *was* in love with a man."

"Harry Greenlees," interposed Edgar. Again Patricia nodded.

"I can't have been. I was attracted to him—I thought I was in love with him. I thought he was my ideal man. I was fond of him. But when it came to the point I felt I couldn't ever marry him. And as a matter of fact he didn't *want* to marry me. He only wanted to have a love affair with me. But I only found that out at the end. Well, it's a very little while ago, and I was in great anguish; and now I've forgotten him. It couldn't have been anything; anything but just a silly playing at love and beauty. It wasn't his fault. He did care for me in his own way; but it was a grown-up way; and I wasn't ready for grown-up love. I'm not ready

now. I'm shallow. I don't think I could love anybody. Perhaps what you said is true."

Edgar had listened with attention; and he could tell that she was being painfully honest, and that she could not help being honest with him; and this made him feel proud and humble. It seemed to Edgar to be the first step in such a relation as theirs must be if it was to lead to happiness for them both.

"There doesn't seem to me to be much wickedness there," he suggested mildly.

"No, there isn't," said Patricia, with a faint colour coming to her cheeks. "The wickedness comes later. The wickedness comes up to last night." She could tell that he was now really serious, and she faltered. "It's . . . it's Monty," she concluded. Edgar's head jerked.

"Monty!" he cried. "Monty! Oh, but my dear, how *could* you?" He was incredulous. "Monty!"

"He fascinated me. There was no question of my being in love with him. But he made me feel I was wonderful and beautiful. . . ."

"But to be taken in by Monty!" exclaimed Edgar. "It's extraordinary. I believe women *must* somehow be less fastidious than men. You couldn't imagine me fascinated with Monty's counterpart?" His face expressed the horror he felt at his own image. Patricia shuddered.

"You'd never be fascinated by anybody," she said. "You'd always be quite calm. Besides, you don't want to be thought wonderful."

"I don't want Brummagem admiration."

"And you don't *give* it!" she flashed at him. "You don't give *any* admiration. You don't think I'm wonderful. You think I'm a silly child. Well, that makes . . . you see, I *couldn't* love you. . . ."

"By the way," said Edgar, coolly. "What makes you

think you're so jolly wonderful? Is it something you *do*, or something you *are*?"

Patricia looked at him breathlessly. She was stimulated to temper.

"Nobody could *ever* love you!" she cried angrily. "You're too inhuman!"

vi

Her hands were now altogether withdrawn from him, and tears sparkled in her eyes. Edgar bent forward, so that she could not escape him.

"Look here, Patricia," he said. "Can you imagine the feeling of a lover who hears that the girl he loves has been making love to an obvious rotter the previous evening? I mean, if there's one thing that strikes me about Monty more than another it is his lack of . . . what can I say?—his lack of . . . I think he's obviously sensual and unclean. I can't see his fascination for you. If I came to you and said I'd been with some horrible woman, wouldn't you turn sick? Well, I'm disappointed. I'm angry. The love-making is nothing unless you meant it, which you didn't. It's nothing. You exaggerate its importance. You were never in any real danger. I don't blame you, except for folly. Though of course I don't like it. But that you should be *taken in* by Monty!"

"I wasn't taken in. I knew he must be a rotter. And yet, you see, I went there," said Patricia. "That shows the sort of girl I am. I was miserable and reckless. It amused me to—to play with him, if you like. It made me feel a woman. I was trying to grow up. You've made a mistake, Edgar." She was bitter, but not only with anger. There was hopelessness also in her defiance. "You ought to marry a *nice* girl."

"I propose to," said Edgar. "I propose to marry you."

"Oho!" cried Patricia. "You won't marry me. You needn't think it."

"Unless of course," retorted Edgar. . . . "Unless I adopt you. That might be the simpler course." He also for the moment was bitter with chagrin. He was encountering a fact which was hard to accept; and he was in love with Patricia.

vii

Leaving Patricia aghast at his alternative, he began to drive on; and the sun continued to glitter upon the polished metal of the car and upon the wind screen. Patricia lay back in her corner recovering her temper and her composure. Presently she shouted at him.

"You've got too much respect for women!" she said. Edgar took no notice of her. She was quiet a little while, thinking. At last: "You're quite right. I'm *not* wonderful! Edgar, stop! I want to talk to you. I want to tell you something."

The car was checked; and in her very truthful voice Patricia described the events of the previous evening. When she came to the thousand pounds Edgar exclaimed. At the mention of two thousand he turned quickly to her.

"Monty was prepared to go up to two-thousand five-hundred," he said. "He's got a regal way of pensioning his mistresses. You might have made two-thousand five-hundred pounds, Patricia."

"He offered to marry me," answered Patricia, defiantly. "But he didn't really mean it, of course. It was only something to attract my attention."

"I was thinking," said Edgar, slowly. "Your lovers are rather a fine set of men, aren't they!"

"You think they're something to be conceited about?" retorted Patricia. "Edgar, don't you *really* think I'm rather wonderful!" It was apparently wistful; but only apparently so.

"I'm so concerned with my own marvellousness," he crudely answered, "that I can't spare time to admire yours."

"But Edgar, girls *have* to be admired," she said. "Look here: you've *done* something. You've achieved something. Can't you see that if you've never *done* anything you have to make up something to live for. If I loved you, and had no other ambition, I could live in your interests, as you want me to. But I can't play second fiddle—not yet—not until I've sown my wild oats. If I'm no good, then . . ."

Edgar turned round. If he observed the fiddler sowing wild oats he ignored the confusion.

"There's something in that," he said. "I don't *want* you to play second fiddle. You haven't made up your mind to marry me; but you've got a sense that you're *going* to . . . that's so, isn't it?" There was a pause.

"I think so," answered Patricia at last, in a very quiet voice. "It seems inevitable. That is, if I'm to marry anybody at all. But I'm not ready to marry you."

"What you'd like to do is not to make up your mind. You'd like to go on as we are, being friends, until I'm tired of you and you are tired of me, and we can have disagreeable middle-ages of loneliness and regret. I don't care to waste our lives in that way. I admit that I'm not an ideal lover; but I've got other points, and you know them. You know that in some curious way you depend on me. You may not be in love with me; but no other man means as much to you, or will ever mean as much. If it's put to you that you either marry me or lose me, you'll marry me rather than lose me. But if

you don't love me, it would be very wrong to marry me simply because you couldn't bear to lose me. . . ."

Patricia allowed him to wander on. She was smiling.

"I like to hear you talk," she said. "It's agreeable. It's all irrelevant, and verbose; and if you think I'm to be threatened into marrying you, you're mistaken. Can't you see it would murder my vanity? But I haven't anything to give you. You'd be giving to me all the time. I could have given something they wanted to Harry and Monty, and when it came to the point I wouldn't give it, because they couldn't give me anything I wanted in exchange. You can give me a lot. You can make my life worth living. But I can't give you anything, because you don't want it."

"We'll get on to Winchester now," said Edgar, with studied—even ostentatious—patience. "Because I want to take you back to London to tea with some friends of ours—Olivia and Peter Stephens."

"Stephens?" said Patricia. "Aren't they . . . aren't they the married people who are happy?" She became thoughtful. The car began to move; but she was unconscious of everything but her own darting intuitions. Amy . . . the happy young lovers . . . what had Amy said? For an instant full memory of the conversation eluded her. Then at last. "Why take me there?" she asked.

"It'll do you good to meet some real people for a change," said Edgar. "Happy people. People who haven't got their heads cluttered with sophistication and egotism. People who aren't sterile sensation-rakers, and lascivious fiddlers with their senses."

Again Patricia was lost in thought. His rather heated tone was a natural discouragement to her. Suddenly she gave an exclamation.

"Oh, babies!" she said. She did not open her lips again until the car arrived in Winchester.

viii

They had lunched, and were again upon the road; and the bare hedges showed Patricia lands that stretched full of wood and copse and meadow into the farthest distance. From a high place upon a common, where Edgar had halted for the sake of the glorious panorama, she could see Hampshire extending upon the one hand and Surrey upon the other. She was very happy now, but her heart a little ached. It was the breeze, perhaps, that chilled; or a return of her old painful feeling of loneliness. . . . But as Patricia thought that, she knew suddenly what she wanted, and Edgar knew it also, for he put his arm round her.

"My old sweet," he said. "Never think I don't love you,—as much as any Harry or Monty; and with the same warmth. I do. You're everything to me."

His lips were very close; and still Patricia delayed, not excited, but welcoming, half-smiling, half-afraid. She was shy. She had not been shy with Harry or with Monty. But she was shy with Edgar. From him a kiss seemed almost ceremonial. And as she thought that, Patricia blushed.

"Don't let's go to the Stephenses'," she said, breathlessly, her head lowered. "I know why you want me to go there. Do you want babies so much, Edgar? More than you want me? You see, I'm . . . I know I'm conceited and horrible . . . but it's because I feel so worthless." Lower and lower sank her head, to his breast, and she was held close to Edgar's heart. "Funny heart, to beat," she said. "You *do* love me, don't you. . . . Really love me. . . ."

